

Things Have Happened by threedays

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Summary:

After Starcourt, El tries to find her footing. Well, and her dad.

Luckily, she's always been good at finding things.

MAJOR SPOILERS FOR SEASON THREE AHEAD!

1. Gone

Author's Note:

Breathe with me, people.

*LAST CHANCE TO GET OUT MORE OR LESS
SPOILER FREE*

Summary for the Chapter:

In which Joyce gives El the news

El is looking for Hop. Instead, she finds Joyce.

Mrs. Byers walks toward her, halting, stumbling, unable to stop sobbing even as she reaches the girl. Eleven can't stop shaking her head. She can feel her face crumpling up the way it does when something is very wrong. Something is very wrong. She knows it, she can see it on Joyce's face, but *words* aren't her first language, and she is very tired and scared, so she isn't able to call it by name.

Joyce doesn't seem to be able to say it, either. Instead, she places one hand on each of El's shoulders. "I'm so sorry, baby," she sobs.

El has to know. The thing she is thinking can't be true, but Mrs. Byers' face says it is, so she has to be sure. She searches the archives of her mind, word of the day upon word of the day. Turntable. Apologize. Family. Kick-ass. Patience. She lands on, "Gone?"

Joyce nods, lips pressed together so hard they tremble. "Yeah, sweetheart."

“Hop ... Hop is ... gone?” She has to be *sure*, because this can’t be true. So she continues to sort her words, leaves nothing to chance. “Hop *died*?”

Joyce dissolves into tears again, nodding as she tugs El into an embrace so tight that El can feel several of her battle injuries anew. It seems strange that she can feel her injuries when Hopper can’t feel anything. The thought is a punch to her gut. Hop can’t feel anything. Hop, who feels anger until his face looks like a tomato, who feels love till he spins her around to his favorite record, who feels so sorry after he yells that he makes triple-decker Eggos – Hop can’t feel anything.

And before the can’t-feel anything, he must have felt pain.

El hates feeling pain. She’s felt a lot of it tonight. In her throat, in her leg. In what Mike calls her heart even though Dustin explains that an actual heart is the organ that pumps your blood, and if you feel pain there, you should call for an ambulance. Right now she can feel the bruises on her neck and the blood running down her leg and the dull ache of having been thrown around like a rag doll all evening, but she can’t feel anything in her heart. Not her Dustin heart or her Mike one.

Mrs. Byers has not stopped crying. El wants to comfort her the way she did Max such a short time ago, after Billy. Billy who ran on the beach, who was happy, who surfed seven-foot waves like nothing would ever pull him under. Billy, who got pulled under. But she can’t lift her hands. Joyce is clinging to her, fingers sliding on El’s ruined shirt and regaining their purchase over and over again. El’s arms hang at her sides.

“Mom.” Will is there. He’s trying to get his mother not to hold the girl so tightly. “Mom – she’s hurt, go easy. Mom, it’s okay. It’s okay.”

It’s okay.

Jim Hopper is not okay. Jim Hopper felt pain and now he doesn’t feel anything. El can’t lift her arms. She can’t speak. She can’t un-crumple her face. She can’t feel her heart, either sort. It’s missing.

“Mom?” This voice is deeper, but every bit as gentle as Will’s. Jonathon. “Will, what – is she okay? Mom, are you okay?”

Joyce finally pulls back and stops squeezing all El’s bruises. She keeps her hands on El’s shoulders, which is good because El suddenly feels like the ground is moving and she might fall down if Joyce lets go. Joyce meets Jonathon’s gaze, shaking her head slowly. “Hop,” she says in a voice that breaks like the glass above them did just a little while ago, back while Hop and El could still feel.

Around them are lights that flash by design, not because anyone is flayed. People in uniforms different from Joyce’s unfamiliar attire come and go around them. Nobody stops at the island that is Joyce and the three kids. Waves break around them. Waves of rescuers, strangers in the night. Waves of friends at a loss for what to do. Joyce’s sons are holding her arms and she is holding El’s shoulders and Joyce and Will are both crying and Jonathon looks desperately like he wants to. El blinks. She waits.

“Mom, you should let the paramedics look at you,” Jonathon says.

“I’m all right,” Joyce argues.

“Still.”

“No, I’m okay. Let’s just get home, huh?”

“Home.” Some small part of El’s mind recognizes that she’s speaking the way she did when she first came from the lab, in single words repeated, as if she doesn’t know their meaning. Back then, she didn’t. Now she doesn’t, either. Home is what? Home is where? When they did home as word of the day, Hop said it was a place where you and your family were safe and relaxed. Her family isn’t safe. Her family is gone. There’s no cabin, either, only a wreck left behind. There’s no secret knock, no curfew, no rules. There’s not even a box of Eggos in the woods. There is no home. She has no home.

“Yeah, baby,” Joyce says. “Home.” She cups El’s cheek in her hand, and that’s when the wave comes to pull El under. Her knees hit the pavement before she realizes she’s moving. Joyce goes down with her, trying to slow her collapse as El falls in on herself, hands against the wet mall parking lot, both kinds of heart screaming in her chest. The first sob rips from her bruised throat and two more are on its heels so quick she can’t breathe in. She pounds her knuckles against the pavement, pounds her head between her hands. Joyce quickly slides a hand in under her forehead. She beats her head against this new, soft barrier as the terrible sobs rip themselves from her.

When she finally stills, Joyce’s hand on her forehead begins to move,

fingers working into her hair, her other hand rubbing circles on her back. Hop used to rub circles on her back. Not at first because she panicked if he touched her. And not towards the end, because she was too old for that type of thing. But in the middle, when she trusted him but she was still kind of little, she would come out of a nightmare to find him already at her bedside, arms open. He would rub circles on her back and tell her stories about ridiculous things that didn't make any sense, but she didn't care. It wasn't about the words. With her ear against his chest, she could feel his voice rumbling inside him and she could feel his heartbeat and she was *home*.

He felt pain and now he doesn't feel anything and he doesn't have a heartbeat for her to listen to and home is nowhere.

"I know, baby," Joyce is saying, over and over. El is pressed against her. Joyce doesn't rumble, not like Hop did, but El can feel how soft and warm she is and how quickly her heart is beating. "I know, sweet girl, I know."

"I don't," El says in a voice breathless with pain. *What to do. Where to go. How to be.* "I don't know. I don't know. I don't know."

2. Empty

Summary for the Chapter:

In which El returns Hop's care

Empty

(In which El returns Hop's care)

* * * *

It takes her and Max both to budge the box from its post in the trees.

“Gross, it’s slimy,” Max says, fingers slipping on the wet, rotting wood. El doesn’t speak. She feels hot anger in her belly. Not at Max, Max isn’t wrong. It is slimy. But that she has to touch it at all. That she needs help to move the box. With her powers, it would have been easy, but her powers, like so many other things that are a part of her, have gone.

The box has deteriorated quite a bit since the last time El plucked Eggos from its depths. Nobody’s used it. It’s sat out here unneeded in the woods while Hop put food directly on her plate in a warm kitchen in a place called home. The pain never goes away, but sometimes it wells up and fills her to the brim, and this is one of those times. She slams her hip against the box and the wet wood cracks. At last, it comes free.

“Girl power,” Max says, holding up a hand for El to slap. People are so weird. Slapping is bad, unless your friend holds up a hand for you

to slap, or you slap someone on the back to help them stop coughing, or you slap someone on the back to say *congratulations*. Then slaps can be good. It's like how Max says there are good screams and bad screams. And Hop already explained about tears, back when he gave her the birth certificate. Tears can be happy or sad or both at the same time. How does anybody ever know what's going on, ever, when the meanings of things are all tangled up?

Still, El slaps Max's hand, because she knows that's the expectation.

That's how she's gotten through the last couple of weeks, by recognizing what's expected and trying to do it. Otherwise, she would have been completely lost in a sea of customs she didn't understand, strangers whose faces made her nervous, and feelings so big that they have never been a word-of-the-day, so she doesn't know what to call them. Joyce expects her to go to bed at night and get up in the morning, so she goes to bed at night and gets up in the morning. Jonathan sets food in front of her and expects that she take a bite, so she does. He only ever seems to expect one bite, and that's lucky, since she's usually only got one in her.

Between the two of them, the girls are able to lug the heavy box to the edge of the woods. It's awkward and cumbersome and slippery and they have to rest several times before they reach the road. It's a long, slow, halting journey to the place with a name she can't remember that reminds her of cement but different. It takes hours and both girls are sweating and have splinters in their fingers. Max doesn't complain, not once. She talks – about the boys, about movies, once or twice about Billy – but she doesn't expect an answer, and El feels grateful.

It's sunset when they arrive, the sky alive with reds and oranges. Soon, all that color will fade to darkness. In the evening light, the

things – she can't remember what they're called, the stones, the stones with people's names on them – look softer than stone. There are so many. She knows where Hopper's name stone is, but she lets Max lead them the wrong direction a couple of times before she takes over. She isn't ready, but Joyce expects her home at dark, so she'll be home at dark.

"Aah, here we go," Max says. Her voice softens. "El? How you doing?"

El makes eye contact with her friend and swallows, *hard*, but she can't speak even though it's expected. Words won't come and her eyes well up with tears. She doesn't know where she gets all these tears. They keep coming.

"That was a stupid question," Max says, and hugs El. El analyzes her friend's hug even as she returns it because Max needs a hug, too. She can feel how tightly her friend is holding her, arms so much smaller than Hopper's, and softer but stronger than Mike's. She's known so few hugs, and Max's are new. If she fell, the way she sort of thinks she might, Max couldn't catch her. El would hit the ground. Hugs are good, she likes hugs, but no arms have ever made her feel safer than Hop's.

"Okay," Max says, suddenly all business, standing back with her hands on her hips after a quick swipe of her cheeks. "Where do you want it, boss?"

"Next to – next to it. So he can ... reach. That's stupid."

“Not stupid,” Max says. “Did you know the ancient Egyptians buried all sorts of shit with their loved ones to take with them to the afterlife? Even *servants* and shit. It was so morbid.”

“He’s not even here.” It’s true. There’s a box that Joyce explained is for a body, but there isn’t a body, because Hop doesn’t have one of those anymore. Hop’s box holds a uniform and a lot of empty space.

“Still.” Max half-smiles at El. Faces have been so complicated the last couple of weeks. Nobody looks all the way happy or sad or scared or mad. All the people in El’s life are making half-faces, or faces that are two or three feelings mixed up. It’s as hard as reading. Harder, because words stay on a page, but faces change so quickly.

The girls maneuver the box until El nods, satisfied with its placement. She scrambles to reach her backpack without taking it off, because she is suddenly and completely without energy. Drained times a thousand. Max turns her around and does it for her, a tug against her shoulders and the sound of the pack unzipping. Moments later, Max presses the gifts into her hands. A can of beer that’s gone warm. A pack of smokes she stole from Joyce. These things are to Hop what Eggos are to El, so that’s what she brought for him.

It takes two tries to open the box, fingers slipping on the wet wood, light failing. At last, she’s able to tuck the gifts inside for Hopper. For a moment, she lets her mind paint a story where she comes back later and the gifts are gone, and she does it again, and again, and then Hopper himself comes out from between the name stones and follows her home. She knows she won’t check the box to see if the gifts are gone, because they won’t be and that will *hurt*.

“Do you wanna ... you know, say anything?” Max asks. She reaches over and takes El’s hand.

El's thought a lot about what she would say to Hopper if she still could. At the funeral, people said things about how brave he was, and how rowdy. They talked about his past and his bad decisions, but only the funny ones, not the ones that made his face color with shame when he admitted them to her, one by one, over their time together, in whatever context made him think of them. Joyce said things at the funeral, but El couldn't make out her words over the emotion in her voice. Days later, when El still hadn't spoken, Joyce suggested that El write words on paper. *Write him a letter, honey. Sometimes it helps. After Bob, it helped.*

She'd tried to write him a letter, and tried, and tried, and torn up paper after paper until she was sobbing on the floor into a pile of confetti and Joyce was rubbing her back and whispering *sorry, sorry*.

"You don't have to," Max is saying. "I just wondered. You don't have to say anything."

El steps forward, leans down, and kisses the rotting, slick wood the way Hop used to kiss her hair after a nightmare. She remembers the rumble of his voice in his chest as he said things to her on those long, scary nights.

"I'm right here," she says, like he always did, because those are the words, out of all the words anyone has ever said to her, that made her feel the most loved. "I'm right here, Dad."

3. Pushed

Summary for the Chapter:

She thought parenting her boys was hard until this girl came along with her steady gaze and impossible questions.

Notes for the Chapter:

WARNING: This chapter contains some really ugly language. Kids, don't use these words. They suck and the people who use them suck. I'm not talking about, like, f-bombs. I'm talking about the names El and Will get called in this chapter. Suckage.

“Joyce?”

The voice interrupts what was quickly becoming a train wreck in the kitchen. She's burned the potatoes, in compensation for undercooking the okra, and the real plates are still in a box somewhere, so they're going to have to use paper again. Joyce isn't feeling particularly chatty. Her patience feels thin, her temper near the surface. She just wants to be left alone with her failures in her disaster of a kitchen. She doesn't know how to work anything in this new space that she insisted was the best for them.

But the voice that said her name, the quiet voice from the doorway, came from El, and so she won't ignore it, much as she may feel unprepared to deal with whatever it is the girl has to say. El almost always catches her off guard. She thought parenting her boys was hard until this girl came along with her steady gaze and impossible questions. *Why did Max cry for Billy even though he was a mouth-breather? Where does your mind go when your body dies? When will my feelings stop hurting? Did you love my dad like Mike and me love each other?*

“Hi, baby,” Joyce says, hoping her voice sounds like everything is fine. Will and Jonathan would see right through her, but El is still learning her and is far more trusting than the boys. It seems backwards, after everything, that El has maintained more wide-eyed innocence than Joyce thinks she herself has ever known.

“Hi. What’s *retarded*?”

Joyce almost drops the frying pan, and, in her haste to catch it, grazes her hand too close to the stove. The resulting, reflexive jerk causes the pan to go flying, potatoes and all, with a clatter and a sizzle, to the floor. Joyce leaps back out of the way to keep her feet from getting burned, swearing. “Fuck, fuck. Be careful, stay back. Fuck!” She stretches to reach across the mess without touching it to switch off the burner, and for a beat, there is silence.

Then Joyce breaks.

She doesn’t see it coming and it’s sudden and terrible and she does *not* want it to happen in front of El, but it’s too late to stop it. Too many things have gone wrong today and now her dead best friend’s kid is asking about an ugly word that she’s surely been called at school, and dinner’s on the floor, and her house isn’t her home, and her whole life has gone to absolute *shit*.

“Dammit!” she sobs, sliding to the floor, slamming her elbow backward into the door of the oven with a satisfying clang. “Dammit, dammit!” Tears come hot and fast down her cheeks. “Goddamn dinner is ruined, and people are calling you names, and – *fuck*.” She forces herself to take a breath, to regain some control. “Fuck.”

When she looks up, El is still standing in the doorway, but her eyes are wide and scared the way they used to be when the kids first brought her home. So much of her confidence was wrapped up in Hopper and her trust in him. Since he's been gone, El's been fragile. Joyce thinks about what it must have looked like, the pan and the potatoes, the violence of her swearing, and she runs a hand down her face and through her hair, trying desperately to get ahold of herself.

"I'm sorry," she says carefully. Sometimes she forgets – not *forgets* exactly, but just doesn't *remember* – that until two short years ago, El was a captive in a secret lab, used for experiments and never held by a mother. "Dammit," she whispers. Louder, "I'm sorry, El. I didn't – that wasn't – I'm sorry you saw that, honey."

As Joyce stands to extricate herself from the mess on the floor, stepping carefully over the upturned pan only to slip on a slice of potato, El backs up a step, so that the bulk of the doorframe is between them. It's such a little move, one you might not notice unless you'd listened to her dad for days on end – *She gets so scared sometimes, Joyce, like the littlest thing she does might piss someone off, like someone's gonna hurt her, and it just makes me wanna kill someone with my hands* – and you knew to watch for the battle scars of a lifetime of abuse.

"El," Joyce says. She feels tired and about ten thousand years old. "I just, I was surprised, by your question. And I burned myself. That's why I made this big mess, because of the burn. Not because of you, okay?"

"Hurt?" El asks. The single word concerns Joyce but she lets it go by without a comment. Right after Hop, El had regressed dramatically,

speaking only when spoken to and then only in single words. Little by little in the weeks that have followed, she's begun to regain some of her hard-won linguistic skills. It's unnerving to hear her return to her rudimentary way of speech because of something Joyce did. Joyce has had some shit parenting moments in her day, but this sure feels like a doozy of a shit parenting moment.

"The burn? No, I'm okay. It more scared me than anything." She guides El away from the mess with a careful arm around her shoulders. "Come on, we'll order pizza for dinner. Screw healthy."

"Yeah," El echoes after a moment, as Joyce settles them on the couch. "Screw healthy." She smiles over at Joyce, that tiny smile that seems to mean *I'm trying really hard to trust you*.

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It isn't till two days later, when she gets the call from the school, that Joyce remembers El's question.

"Mrs. Byers? This is the secretary at Oakbrook Junior High. We need you to come pick up your child," the voice on the phone informs her in a snide sort of way.

"Which child? What's wrong?" She thinks of panic attacks and the Upside Down before she thinks of the stomach flu. But what she doesn't expect is to hear "fighting" without the word "evil" after it.

“Your daughter’s been fighting. We have a zero tolerance policy here at Oakbrook. You’ll need to pick her up immediately and meet with the vice principal to determine a course of action.”

“Shit,” Joyce mutters as she drives to the school, knuckles white on the wheel. It’s been a while since she’s been called to the principal’s office. Her temper is still near the surface -- apparently that’s where it lives these days -- so she’s already pissed off at whatever little asshole did whatever it was they did that El felt she had to fight them.

Joyce parks in a spot marked “school counselor” because she figures that spot, of all spots, should not be empty while her kid is inside fighting. She puts out her cigarette and gathers herself, practicing her normal-parent disguise under her breath to the empty car. “There’s no need for violence. We can settle our differences without fighting.” *Jesus*. This kid has fought more evil than Batman. She gets a fucking pass.

In the office, Joyce is surprised to find both her children, side by side on the gray fabric chairs. They aren’t looking at each other and they are both pale and scared. Their fingers are loosely intertwined and her heart squeezes. Will and El speak so infrequently that Joyce sometimes forgets there are two kids in the house, but they are never far apart from each other.

“Hey,” Joyce says, zeroing in on her kids instead of the disapproving secretary. “Hey, what is going on? What happened?” Neither child looks hurt, which means it can’t have been too bad of a fight, but Will looks too devastated and El too scared for it to be something minor.

“Ma’am?” A door has opened on the other side of the main office and

a man steps out. “Are you Mrs. Hopper?”

She wonders when her own feelings will stop hurting, but she only forces a fake smile at him. “Ms. Byers.”

“Aah. You’re, um ... “ He looks at an index card in his hand. “Jane Hopper’s mother?”

“Her foster mom.” Or the closest thing to it that Owens could help them create on paper.

Another “Aah.” With each smug little noise that she knows means *No wonder your kid is such a hooligan*, Joyce likes him less, but she figures it would be detrimental to her cause of reducing the amount of trouble El’s in if she hauled off and decked him in the foyer.

“What happened?” Joyce demands.

“Come into my office.”

“Look, just –” She twists to look back at the kids, but neither one will meet her gaze. She knows that whatever the real story is, she isn’t going to get it in this office, but she has little choice but to follow the bureaucrat into his lair. God. She scoffs at her own mental wording. She’s turning into Hopper. “Sit tight,” she says to the kids. It worries her how they won’t look at her. How guilty they both seem.

Back in the car, Joyce lights up a cigarette, adjusts the mirror, and drives three blocks before she speaks.

“I’m waiting for the whole story,” she says at last, her voice clipped. “Because the version I got from Mr. Fitz was missing a detail or two, I think. When they said fight, I was picturing a normal kid thing. Hair-pulling or something. Not an *attack*.” Phrases stick in her mind, phrases like *mentally disturbed* and *pushed him down the stairs* and *broken collarbone* and *perhaps we need to consider additional services for your, ah, foster daughter*. El broke somebody’s bone. Not a monster’s. Not a soldier’s. A kid’s, at school. El might end up expelled. El, and so Joyce, might end up sued.

Worse, El placed herself squarely in the spotlight of the wrong kind of attention, and Joyce feels, for the first time, a little bit of the panic Hop must have drowned in when he first brought the kid home.

“I’m *waiting*,” Joyce says again.

It isn’t El that speaks, but Will. “It wasn’t El’s fault.”

“Oh, that makes sense. It wasn’t El’s fault she pushed someone down the stairs and broke one of his bones?”

“No. It wasn’t. He was being an ass!” Will defends his de facto sister. “He was pushing her and calling her a retard.”

Joyce winces but doesn't let herself get derailed. "So he's a little shit. So what? You can't go around beating the hell out of all the little shits of the world! And trust me!" She takes an emphatic drag off her cigarette. "There are plenty!"

"And I tried to get him to lay off and he called me a –" Will's voice stops short and Joyce hears his breath wobble.

Then El's small, serious voice says, in that way she says words when she doesn't know what they mean, "Faggot."

Joyce and Will both wince at the word.

"Will looked sad," El explains.

Joyce figures "sad" is about the simplest way to describe the complex emotions her sweet son was probably feeling in that moment. Anger so sharp it should be able to draw blood stabs Joyce in the stomach, and for just a second, she's glad the little motherfucker got knocked down the stairs. She's supposed to keep talking – to keep *parenting*, like in the bullshit parenting classes she's being forced to take as a result of El's b.s. foster situation – but she honest to God can't find anything to say.

She knows Will doesn't like girls the way other boys his age do. She hasn't explored the thought any further than that, except to find as many ways as possible to implant in her kid the unshakable knowledge that she will *always* love him and will *always* have his

back no matter *what*.

Apparently, she isn't the only one who feels that way. So even through the fear and confusion and anger, Joyce feels a swell of gratitude toward El for always being there for her boy. She's so soothed by this new feeling, something not-horrible in a sea of horrible, that she can almost take a break between cigarettes.

Then Will says, "Mom, there's more."

"Hang on." Joyce pulls into the driveway of their new home and frees up her hands to light a cigarette. She makes no move to get out of the car. She takes a long drag and breathes out slowly. "Okay. Go ahead." Her eyes find the rearview. Find Will first, looking grave. Then El, who looks terrified, face white with little splotches of color on her cheeks.

"She didn't ... she didn't push him," Will says. "I mean, not with her hands."

Joyce works through what this means, and works through what this means, and then the penny drops and she goes breathless with panic and anger and wonder. "You used your *powers*?" She whips around in her seat to stare at the kids, and El nods miserably. Her eyes are huge and filled with tears.

"Will looked sad," she says again, her voice tiny and sorry.

“You used your powers. On a teenager. In a public place. Where everyone could see you. Jesus Christ, El, what is the *matter* with you? Do you want to get yourself killed? Or dragged back to the lab again? Christ, Fitz back there was ready to toss you in a nuthouse already. What if this kid you hurt tells someone what he saw?”

Under Joyce’s anger, El scoots closer to Will. Her breath hitches. “Mom,” the boy says. “Ease up.”

“I will not ease up! Don’t you understand? You’re putting yourself in danger -- All, all of us! You’re putting all of us in danger!” She catches her breath for a second. “And since when are they back? Your powers? Were you even going to tell me?”

“I didn’t know they were back,” El sobs, “till I saw Will look sad! I didn’t know!” She rips off her seatbelt and bolts from the car. As she fights her own seatbelt to follow, Joyce hopes for a slammed door and some loud teenage angst music, but her heart sinks as El runs away from the house, not toward it.

4. Worth

Summary for the Chapter:

CHAPTER FOUR: Worth

In which Will and El find each other

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He finds her lying by the creek, the sleeve of her sweater tied around her eyes, the noise of the water masking his footsteps. He recognizes what she's trying to do, but he notices there isn't any blood under her nose, and his heart squeezes in sympathy.

"Maybe you just need more time," he says. He expects her to be startled at his sudden arrival, but she doesn't react. For a moment, he's worried something's wrong with her, but then she reaches up and pulls the sweater off her eyes.

"Hi." Her voice is thick with tears that he can see now she's removed the blindfold.

"Hi," he repeats, sliding down to sit next to her. She's been gone over an hour, but she didn't actually make it that far from the house. She's lying flat and doesn't sit up, looking up at the trees while her tears roll down the sides of her face into her hair. Will reaches over and wipes one away before it can go in her ear. He hates when that happens.

"Mad?"

“What? No, I’m not mad.”

She shakes her head. “Joyce. Mad?”

Will is slower to answer this time. “I think you scared her is all,” he says carefully.

“Scared,” she repeats softly. Now she does sit up, crossing her legs and facing him. “I’m. Scared.” She tells him haltingly.

It worries him that she’s slipped back into this regressed way of speaking, but at least she’s able to tell him what’s on her mind.

“Me, too,” Will says, and reaches out to capture her hand. He’s so nervous. There’s, like, zero chance that he’s not going to fuck this up, but he’s the one who found her, so he’s got to figure something out. She watches intently as his thumb slides back and forth across the back of her hand. “I’m scared for you,” he adds. “You don’t have to do that, you know.”

“Do what?”

“Stick up for me. It’s not worth getting yourself in trouble or hurt over.”

“Worth?”

“You know. Like – is the thing you’re doing valuable enough to make the consequences okay.” It’s so hard to define a word without accidentally using that word in your definition.

She looks into his face and there are so many emotions on hers that he doesn’t even know where to start. He would bet she isn’t even able to name them all herself. “You,” she says, poking him somewhat roughly in the chest with her free hand. “Are worth.”

He looks away. He doesn’t feel worth it, hasn’t felt worth it in a long time. Not since a rainy garage and a terrifying observation from his closest friend. He gets to his feet and offers her a hand up.

“Come on,” he says, eager to rid himself of that particular train of thought. “Let’s go home.”

But El yanks her hand free of his, backing up as though he’s threatened her. In her sudden haste, she trips backwards over a tree root and goes sprawling. He tries to reach for her, but she scrambles to her feet, further from him, yanking free of the clinging roots and vines. There’s not even a deer trail in this part of the woods. It’s not the best place to escape, but she seems hell bent on trying.

“Hey, wait. Wait!” Yep. He’s fucked it up. Panic creeps into his voice. He can’t go home without her and see his mother’s terrified face. He can’t go home and tell Mike he’s lost her. Most importantly, he owes it to El to keep her safe, and crashing through undergrowth in the forest with no direction or supplies is not safe. “El, please, *please*, just wait.”

She stops moving away from him, but she doesn't stop moving, shoulders heaving, breath hitching. When she looks at him, her face is utterly devastated, in a way that makes him want to scream because everything is just so *hard*. "What?" she asks in a broken voice. He isn't sure what he's done to upset her, why she's suddenly acting like he's going to attack.

"Where are you going? Why are you acting like, like you're scared of me or something? El?"

"Worth," she says.

"I don't understand." He tries not to feel frustrated, but he can feel his hands starting to shake.

"You. Joyce. Jonathan. Worth keeping safe."

He is baffled, at an absolute loss, searching through their creekside conversation for anything he might have said that she could have taken wrong. It takes far too long for him to remember his mother's words in the car – *you're putting all of us in danger* -- words El has clearly taken like an arrow to the heart.

"Oh," he says. "No. No, that's not what she – are you thinking about what Mom said? That's not what she meant."

“Danger,” she says. Her eyes flash with something dark, hurt. They’re so, so huge. “I’m danger.”

“No!” He chances a tiny step forward, hands raised as if to show her he’s not carrying a weapon, which is stupid considering everything they’ve both been through. Even without her powers, she could kick his ass in a flat second and they both know it. “No,” he says again. “El. You’re *not* danger. You’re *in* danger. And you’re worth being kept safe, too. Okay?”

Confusion and anguish play across her features. He watches her work so, so hard to find the right words as tears leak out between her lashes. “Hop,” she says, in a high, frail voice that cracks. She swallows and tries again, only slightly steadier. “Hop kept me safe.”

“Yeah. He did. And he’d want me and Mom and Jonathan to do the same.”

“Hop *died*,” she says, “keeping me safe.”

Oh. Fuck.

She’s not just grieving Hop. She feels responsible. He should have realized it sooner. After all, they’re both so very alike in the way that they feel guilty for things they can’t control. He knows too well that guilt is a powerful, painful emotion on its own, but all mixed together with grief and fear and anger, well, he doesn’t know how she’s still standing.

There aren't any words, but he has to do something.

Feeling like he needs to roll an impossibly high number for the move he's about to make to land, Will steps quickly over tree roots to reach the girl who's become his sister. He presses his arms around her, awkward, not sure where to put his hands or his chin or if he should try to say anything or just hold her. In the circle of his arms, her body stays tensed, as if she's ready to fight or to flee and she just hasn't decided which to do yet.

"You're worth keeping safe," Will says again.

He feels the first sob without hearing anything. She cries silently, as though she's afraid to take up any more space in the world. He understands. Jesus Christ. To the core of his soul, he understands.

"You're worth it," he says again.

She grips the back of his shirt in both fists and lets him ease them both down to sitting.

"You're worth it," he repeats, tears starting down his own cheeks.

She burrows her face into his neck, by far the most intimate thing a girl who isn't his mother has ever done to him, but it doesn't feel as weird as it should, because El is sad and she's his sister and she's –

“Worth it,” she repeats back to him in a broken voice. “Both of us. Worth it.”

And because he’s insisting she believe it, he figures it’s only fair if he tries to do the same.

It’s only later, as they’re picking their way back among the roots and branches toward – or at least, Will *hopes* toward – their new neighborhood that he thinks about her activity when he found her.

“Did you see anything?” he asks, though he’s pretty sure he knows the answer. “In the void?”

“I couldn’t get there,” she says sadly. “I don’t understand. I pushed Aaron. I didn’t even try.”

“Well, Aaron has that effect on people,” Wil says ruefully.

“But when I try, it’s like –it’s like words.”

“Okay, you lost me.”

“Words,” she insists. “I know what I want to say, but I don’t know the *words*. My powers are like that.”

“Well, what were you hoping to see? Were you checking in on Mike, or seeing if Mom was mad, or what?”

She doesn't answer for a really long time. They've cleared the woods and are cutting a path through the backs of their neighbor's yards by the time she says, “Hop.”

He looks at her quickly. She doesn't look back, and she isn't crying, but he's never seen someone look so sad.

“You think he's still alive?” Will asks, grief and pity and just a tiny tendril of hope tinging his words.

She shakes her head miserably. “No. I'm just trying to see if I can – I want to know *where* he – where he *went* when he --”

Will waits. They circumvent Mrs. Winebrenner's tomato garden. Mr. Alcott's dog loses its tiny little wiener dog mind at the end of its chain.

“I'm hoping,” El says, “he left the door open three inches. So I can see.”

5. Static

Summary for the Chapter:

In which there is contact

* * *
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“Hang on, we’re getting some interference. Over.” Dustin’s voice cuts in and out and for a moment there’s nothing but static. It’s the Saturday between halves of El’s ten-day suspension from school, and though she’s done little else but lay around in her room (trying to see things just out of reach, Will would reckon), she looks exhausted, as though she’s defeated a dozen monsters while he’s been slogging through eighth-grade literature.

If Lucas were here, he would make some crack about how anything, even monsters, is better than eighth-grade literature. But Will and El don’t joke about monsters.

“Dustin?” Will asks. “Do you copy? Over.”

Static.

“Dustin, do you copy?”

“... *made it through that mess ...*”

Will looks at El and El looks at Will, both of them equally surprised.

“... *ways make it. You’re a damn super ...*”

Static.

“That ... wasn’t Dustin,” El ventures.

“We must be picking up somebody else’s signal,” Will explains. “I hope it’s not Fitz. He’s on his stupid radio all the time trying to control everybody.” He doesn’t add that when Jonathan dropped him off at school one day last week with El in the car, Will overheard Vice Principal Fitz alerting whoever was at the other end of his walkie to be aware that *that little juvenile delinquent girl is on the property*. Asshole.

“It’s Saturday,” is all El says, but her face looks pinched, intense. She leans closer to Will and his walkie, only to get an earful of Dustin.

“Son of a bitch!”

“Well, that’s definitely Dustin,” Will mutters. “Hey. We can hear you again. We were getting somebody else’s signal for a minute.”

“Oh, sorry. Cerebro just wants to talk to everybody. Don’t you, Cerebro?”

“He’s ... talking to his radio,” El observes.

“Careful, Suzie’s going to get jealous,” Will teases.

“Fuck off, Will,” Dustin says cheerfully.

“Where’s ... Mike?” El asks. Will hasn’t mentioned it, but he’s noticed that the pauses between Eleven’s words have returned and are getting longer, as though she’s having to work increasingly hard to access her vocabulary. Coupled with the fact that he keeps finding her at various locations around the house with a blindfold looped over her eyes and nothing more substantial than tears dampening her face, he’s starting to worry about her more than usual. Enough that she’s picked up on it and is trying to avoid him as much as possible. It makes for an awkward breakfast table, but this afternoon, with the promised call from their friends, the mood is relaxed.

“On his way,” Dustin says. “Lucas and Max are coming, too. Everybody misses you guys. Hawkins just hasn’t been the same without you.”

“Isn’t Hawkins not being the same a good thing?” Will points out.

“Not in *that* way. In other ways, yes. No evil Russians. No Mind Flayer. Definite improvements. But it’s kinda sucky around here without my best friends. That’s you guys, in case you’re wondering. Or at least, you’re 33.3 bar percent of my best friends.”

Will envies the easy way Dustin can admit his love for his friends. For Will, everything feels mixed up and confusing. He’s afraid to admit

his feelings and have it come out wrong (emphasis on *come* out, his brain betrays him by adding), so he errs on the side of saying nothing at all.

“It’s ... *kinda sucky* ... around here without you, too,” El says. Jeez. Even the kid who can barely make words can admit her feelings before Will can.

Dustin says something back, but there’s a crackle and a zap of static, and then that other voice is back, the one that isn’t Dustin, scratchy and garbled. “... *for my daughter. Eat a vegetable. Come up for air* ...”

“What is that?” Will asks. The look on El’s face is intense. It makes Will more nervous than he should be just over some interference. “Dustin, did you hear that? Over.”

“Negative,” Dustin says. “All I hear is Lucas’s *incredibly bad attempt at being covert!*”

“Is that them?” Lucas’s voice is faint and tinny in the background. There’s a scuffle, and then he’s much more clear: “Will! El! Settle an argument. Velma and Daphne: just friends, or more to the story?” Will can practically hear Lucas’s suggestive eyebrow wiggle and Max’s disgusted eye roll in response. Some things carry over great distance.

“You’re arguing about Scooby Doo? That’s why you’re late?” Now Dustin’s voice is the one that’s tinny in the background. The subject matter of Lucas’s question has preoccupied Will, who’s so full of dread and panic that it takes him a minute to realize El isn’t listening

to their friends. She's moved a few feet away, heels of her hands pressed so hard against her eyes that he can see her arms tremble.

"Whoa," Will says softly. He doesn't have time to say more before the static on the walkie gets louder. Too loud to be just static on the walkie. Will feels the back of his neck prickle, not in a Flayer way, not exactly, but in a *something's not normal* sort of way.

Across the airwaves, the unfamiliar voice comes again, and it strikes Will that *unfamiliar* isn't the right word. More like *unexpected*.

Really, really, *really* freaking unexpected.

"... *crap's gone down in your life, and I know how you can get bogged down and just ...*"

Will's on his feet, hands outstretched toward El. It's an instinct he's noticed a lot of people have with her, the instinct to show her that their hands are empty, their intentions straightforward. He doesn't know whether it's because of her history of trauma, to convince her they mean no harm, or because of her history of – well, murder and mayhem – to show her they're unarmed. He's not sure why he's doing it now at all, since she isn't looking at him.

There's another burst of static and the lights dim, and then –

"... El, are you there? El? It's Mike. Are you there?"

“Shit,” El says, quite unexpectedly, dropping her hands from her face. Underneath, her expression is difficult to read, part anger and sadness, part wide-eyed urgency, and – hope? Will scrubs a hand down his own face, uncertain.

“Yeah, we’re here,” he says to his friends on the other end of the radio. “Hey, Mike.”

“Hey, Will! Is El with you?”

Will tries not to be frustrated by Mike immediately asking for his girlfriend instead of talking to his lifelong best friend for a minute. He falls short – he’s *definitely* frustrated – but his frustration is tempered by confusion when El doesn’t return Mike’s romance-obsessed intentions in kind. Normally, she’d be scrambling for the walkie, ready to soak up every one of Mike’s words as though they hold great wisdom -- because she’s only known him two years and she doesn’t know yet what an idiot he can be sometimes, Will can’t help but think – but instead, she’s repositioned herself a few feet away and put her hands back over her eyes.

“Uh ... yeah, she’s here,” Will says, unsure how to explain, and then he’s saved from having to. The walkie thrums with energy, vibrating in his hand. Static erupts again, unnaturally loud, filling the room. The lightbulb overhead glows too brightly for its wattage. The air itself is charged with electricity and the static reaches a painful crescendo, blending all other sounds into its screaming nothingness, and Will is starting to full-on panic when –

“ ... *at least be okay.*”

-- when everything stops. The lights, the static. El's hands drop and her eyes snap open. Will stares at her in awe as her shoulders heave as though she's been running. Blood drips from her nose. The voice that comes next is so clear it may as well be in the same room with them, not just on the walkie. Will recognizes it even as he acknowledges that it can't be him, it can't be who he thinks it is.

One more transmission breaks through, and then the walkie grows hot enough to burn Will's hand. He drops it and it clatters to the floor, the casing cracking as batteries scatter, leaving only empty space where moments ago, there were words:

"Be okay for me, kid," the Chief had said.

"Hop!" El cries, dropping to her knees to scramble for the scattered batteries. "Wait, come back! *Hop!*"

"Holy shit," Will breathes. "Hey, whoa --" El's started crying, suddenly, and *hard*, but she's still trying to get the batteries into the device with shaking hands. He steadies her hands with his and takes the batteries from her. "Let me do it."

The plastic is still warm, and he thinks it's a little warped in places, but he manages to get the batteries more or less back where they go. Unfortunately, more or less isn't good enough for batteries, and no matter how he fiddles with the switches, he can't get the walkie to turn on again.

"Can you fix it?" El pleads. He's never seen anyone cry quite the way she's crying, as if it simply takes too much energy to stop herself and

she's got other priorities for her energy.

"I – I don't know," Will stammers. "Give me a minute – hey! El!" Lately it feels like all he does is chase after his friend, shouting *wait* and being ignored. In fact, that seems to be a broader theme of his life, but now isn't the time to dwell on it. He follows El into the living room, where Joyce and Jonathan are putting plastic on the windows for the cold front that's forecast to hit this evening.

"Whoa, whoa!" Joyce says, dropping her end of a large sheet of plastic as the kids barge into the room. Jonathan throws his hands up in defeat as the plastic twists and tangles. "What's going on?"

"Have to go!" El's voice sounds tearful as she bangs through the front door, leaving it swinging open in her wake. On the door, where her hand touched, she's left a smear of blood from her nose. Will sees the moment Joyce sees it, whole body freezing for a split second before she goes icy calm. *Mom-calm*, Jonathan used to call it. *It's always mom-calm before the mom-storm.*

"Will. What happened?" Joyce demands.

He breathes heavy for a second, looking between Jonathan and Joyce as his heart pounds almost out of his chest. "We – I think I heard – there's no time, we have to catch her!" He bolts for the door the way El did, and he's halfway across the front yard when Jonathan blasts by him, smacking him lightly on the head as he goes.

"Car!" Jonathan hollers, and Will changes his course. *Duh.* He dives for the back seat while his mom and brother slide in up front, the car

in motion before the doors are even closed. Will feels a rush of gratitude that Jonathan is taking him so seriously, even without knowing what's going on. Will said they had to catch up to El, so Jonathan intends to catch up to El. The trust makes something warm inside Will, even as a larger part of him is gnawed by worry for his friend.

“What the hell happened?” Joyce asks again as they peel out in the direction El’s gone. She’s no longer in sight, having the advantage of cutting across yards and shimmying through fences, but the neighborhood is a cul-de-sac and there’s really nowhere for her to go except back out toward the main road. That or the woods, and those are squarely opposite of the direction she set out. Will scans the yards as Jonathan drives.

“There!” he says, pointing to where he’s caught a glimpse of a running figure. From a distance, it’s easier to see the limp El still sports from her injury from the Flayer. She’s mostly healed, a scar Mike calls badass and El calls bitchin’ all that’s left to remind her of the parasite that once dwelled in her leg, but she still has trouble with more athletic pursuits. She’s out of sight again before Jonathan can react, but at least they know now that they’re heading in the right direction.

“Will,” Joyce says, Mom-calm tipping toward Mom-storm. “What. Happened?”

“We heard ...” Will says, and stops.

“What, you heard what?” Joyce prompts.

But Will bites his lip. He can't do it. What if he's wrong? He can't give his mother false hope about Hopper. She's only just started to seem like herself again.

"What, is it something bad?" Joyce asks, her voice going high at the end with worry. "Something dangerous? You know you can tell me, honey. *Please.*"

"Will, just tell her," Jonathan prods, knuckles white on the wheel.

"We were talking to Dustin on the radio," Will stalls.

"Okay? Jesus, Jonathan, try not to kill us! Okay – we're okay." Jonathan takes a turn a little too sharply and Joyce steadies herself with one hand, reaching in the back to needlessly steady Will with the other, even though he's 14 years old and has fought worse things than centrifugal force.

"We weren't getting a very good signal," Will continues. "There was interference." He draws a deep breath, winces, gathers courage.

"Hey," Jonathan says suddenly, and the wind goes out of Will's sails for a moment. "Does anybody recognize where we're going?"

For the first time, Will pays attention not just to El's desperate sprint but to the actual route she's taking. Joyce must also be working out where they are, because she says in confusion, "The school? Why would she be going to the school? It's Saturday and she's suspended."

But Will knows. He thinks of Fitz. “Because schools have radios,” he says.

Notes for the Chapter:

Y'all's feedback is amazing. Thank you!!

6. Enough

Summary for the Chapter:

In which there are two fathers

* _ *

Notes for the Chapter:

Two chapters in one day? That's right, you get a Sunday bonus!

Because writing a second chapter is, like, WAY better than prepping for Monday like I'm supposed to be doing.

* _ *

"Kid, I don't know if you're looking." Jim's stretched out on his crappy little bunk, like he has been for the last however-many-days-it's-been. At first he tried to keep track, and he thinks he's somewhere in the 150-ish range, but it's tough to tell when day and night are all the same inside the cinderblock walls.

He runs a hand down his face, smoothing his emotions if not his unruly facial hair. If she's looking, he doesn't want to worry her.

"I don't even know if you – you know – made it – through that mess at the mall. God. Of course you did, who am I kidding? You always make it. You're a damn superhero."

A superhero, sure. But also a kid, *his* kid. He'd sure like to know

exactly what happened at the mall after he and Joyce went underground. God, Joyce. He prays to whatever's up there – *up*, not upside *down* – that Joyce made it back to the surface unharmed, that she gathered up three children and went home safe.

He knows his kid, and so, he knows that if she's able, she'll be wandering around that creepy void of hers, looking for him. He doesn't know exactly how it works – right? I mean, who actually does know how their teenage daughter's mind works, and when you factor in evil government science experiments and special spoon-bending powers, just thinking about it is enough to give a dad a migraine and high blood pressure.

"If you're looking, honey, I just – I miss you and I love you, okay?" The words come easiest when she's not staring him down with those gigantic eyes. "I don't know how to tell you how to find me, and it's okay. You don't have to. You've done e-damn-nough."

Understatement of the year, he thinks. She's done more than enough for one human for one lifetime. And although he's long known she was raised in terrible circumstances, he has a special understanding of what she went through now that he's locked in a stone cell with no daylight to reach him. He's hurting and he's weak with hunger and thirst, but what's really killing him is that nothing ever changes.

Nothing happens and you stay safe, his own voice echoes back to him in his memory. Guilt makes it even more difficult to breathe. He thought he understood, back then, the depth of her need for freedom. He thought it was the same freedom any young teenager craved. Surely it was the right call, prioritizing safety over freedom. Surely even a surly, angry kid could understand.

Turns out he was the one who didn't understand. Not back then. Not

even close.

One hundred and fifty-odd days in this prison is enough to have him climbing the walls and hearing voices that he knows aren't there. One hundred and fifty-odd days isn't even half a year. El spent *twelve* years held in tiny cells like this, and she was a *kid*.

It took ages, when she first moved in with him, to get over her fear of small spaces. Even now, he wouldn't exactly call her *over* it. It's more that she's brave and tough and she can *tolerate* it if she has to. When he first brought her in from the woods, she was afraid to even be in his car unless he rolled the window down a little, snow or no snow. She propped her bedroom door open so the gusts of wind wouldn't close it as they worked on shoring the cabin up against the weather. Hell, she wouldn't even *pee* with the bathroom door closed for the first six months at the cabin.

Mike Wheeler aside, when Hop found himself, years later, demanding that El leave her bedroom door open three inches, along with the fatherly worry and the misplaced anger, he felt *pride* that she could handle closing the bedroom door at all.

"You've done enough," Hop repeats. He imagines his girl watching him, and tears fight for release. "So I'll tell you what I need you to do for me instead. What you can do for me is look out for my daughter. Eat a vegetable. Maybe come up for air sometimes when you're kissing Mike. I know a lot of sh-crap's gone down in your life, and I know how you can get bogged down and just – everything gets so heavy. So I'm not gonna tell you to be happy, not yet. I *want* you to be happy. And someday you *will* be happy. But right now – after everything – I need you to at least be okay.

"Just ...

“Be okay for me, kid.”

Footsteps in the corridor cut off any further sentiments, and he quickly wipes his eyes. He'll be damned if he lets them see his weakness.

He doesn't entirely even know who “*them*” is, just that they don't speak English and they are equipped with both weapons and cruelty. He doesn't know how many others are in the prison, or what they hope to accomplish when they visit him, checking his vitals, scanning him like he's some kind of goddamn test subject. It's dehumanizing and humiliating and his kid had endured it her whole life. When he's not under the influence of the whatever-it-is they sometimes inject him with, he spends his time imagining seven hundred different ways to kill everyone who has ever touched him or his family. In his mind, he's including Joyce and her boys as well as El in his list of family. He only has to worry whether Joyce made it out of Starcourt; if she did, he knows he doesn't have to worry about who's taking care of his daughter. They'd made a promise to each other in case anything happened. Even if they hadn't, Jim knows Joyce.

Hop slowly becomes aware, as the voices approach, that today is different from other days. Starved for language, his brain takes a moment to process that he understands the words in the corridor:

“... how he survived?” the voice is saying, in smooth, native-sounding English.

“He jump,” the other voice says in a broken, heavy accent. “Through the gate.”

“Fuck is this, we’re working with the Russians now?” Jim mutters. He’s not sure who he means by ‘we,’ because, although he’s American, he’s not an evil government scientist, and so, does not fall squarely onto either of the teams represented in the corridor. Christ, you can’t tell who the good guys are anymore, he thinks, except you can pretty much bet that nobody who has a hand keeping him in this prison is a good guy. American or Russian or fucking *Martian*, if they’ve got a hand in keeping him captive, they’re pretty much a guaranteed asshole.

“He jumped?” The smooth voice answers, slightly surprised, and ... pleased? Impressed? Something about the voice makes Hop uneasy.

Sure enough, he had jumped. Faced with certain death or only *almost*-certain death, Hop had jumped through the gate just before it closed. Injured from the blast and disoriented by the sudden leap into the Upside Down, he’d spent an amount of time he couldn’t account for languishing in that parallel hell before the Russians pulled him out. He wasn’t sure how, though in dismay, he knew it wouldn’t be possible unless there was another gate somewhere. Lord, how many of these gates into a hell dimension did these scientists have to open before they decided it was probably not going to turn out the way they thought?

“We rescue him,” the halting voice went on.

The smooth voice answered, “What has he told you?”

“Ничего,” the voice says. “Nothing.”

The other voice, the American-sounding one. It rings some distant bell in the back of Hop's mind. But before he can dwell on it, he can hear the cell door unlocking, the clang of keys.

And then goddamn if Martin motherfucking Brenner isn't standing in the doorway.

"Hello, Jim," Brenner says in what he probably thinks passes for a civilized tone. How civilized you can really be when speaking to a kidnapped prisoner in a Russian cell, Jim isn't sure, but the suit in front of him puts on airs, just the same.

"What. The fuck," Jim says, his voice rough with disuse and illness, "are you doing alive, you son of a bitch?"

"I've come to talk, Chief," Brenner says, coming closer. "Don't you know? We're practically family now. We have a lot to talk about, you and I."

Weak or not, Hopper stands suddenly enough that Brenner stops his approach. Jim cracks his neck and flexes his fingers, testing his ability to do what needs done. He figures he's got at least one or two good punches in him and that whatever comes after will be worth it. This is the son of a bitch who hurt his kid.

"Yeah," Jim echoes, voice laden with menace. "We do need to ... *talk*. How 'bout I go first?"

7. Cavalry

Summary for the Chapter:

In which help more or less eventually arrives (twelve hours later than it might have if Steve had listened to Robin who was holding the map in her actual hands, Dingus)

* * *
— —

Mike Wheeler is entirely out of sorts.

First off, he didn't get to talk to his girlfriend at all before whatever happened on her end of the radio happened. Second, she hasn't answered any of his phone calls for the last several hours, nor has anyone else at the Byers residence. The last time he dialed, it only rang once, and then clicked and went to dial tone, as though somebody picked the phone up and dropped it back into its cradle. What started as irritation slowly seeped into worry, and what once could be called worry is now well on its path to becoming panic.

And third, he called shotgun. Yet here he is in the back seat, squished between Lucas and Dustin, with Max's legs draped across him from her perch on top of Lucas. Up front, Steve and Robin are arguing about the best route to Forester.

"I'm holding the map in my actual hands, Dingus. You're going to argue with me?"

"Yeah, well, I'm holding the steering wheel in my actual hands, Robin. Teamwork makes the dream work."

“This particular dream is going to end up out of gas somewhere in Missouri if you don’t get us off this road.”

“And where? Where would you like me to get off this road? Should I have pulled off at the boarded-up gas station, or do you suppose the sketchy gravel road that appeared to double back under the underpass, which I’m sure *isn’t creepy at all*, was the way to go?”

“The way to go was seventeen miles ago when I told you to take a right, Steven.”

“I *did* take a right.”

“No, you took a left, panicked, almost hit a parked mail truck, and then circled back around and ended up going the same direction as before. Which I tried to tell you.”

Steve drives in silence for a few seconds before he says, “Oh, shit. Did I?”

The kids in the back seat groan, covering faces with arms and nudging each other in dismay.

“Calling Steve was the worst idea you’ve ever had,” Mike says to Dustin.

“No way,” Lucas argues. “You’re forgetting the time he kept a baby

demodog as a pet and lied to his friends about it.”

“That was *one time*,” Dustin protests.

As the bantering continues, Mike leans his head back against the seat, staring upside down through the back window, out into the night. He misses El. He’s worried about her. But right now, he’s surprised to find himself missing Will even more. He can always count on Will to sense his mood, to know whether he can be joked out of his funk, or whether he needs to be taken more seriously. In this situation, Mike knows Will would steer the conversation to a quieter topic, giving Mike’s nerves a chance to settle. As it is, every time Dustin or Lucas laughs, or Steve and Robin tease each other in the front seat, Mike’s patience wears a little more thin.

Finally, he’s had enough. “I hope you know you could be cracking jokes while our friends are dead somewhere,” he snaps.

“In Forester, I hope,” Robin says, and Steve knocks an elbow against her shoulder. “Oh, I mean ... I didn’t mean I hope they’re dead. I was only responding to the ‘somewhere’ part of your statement. Obviously, I hope they’re in Forester and also alive, right?”

“Robin,” Steve says.

“Yeah?”

“Ssh.”

“Okay.”

“Mike,” Dustin says. “Nobody’s dead.” He means today, that their friends are alive today, but Starcourt is too recent and the feelings too raw for Dustin’s statement not to cause a weight to sink the mood in the car like a stone. “Shit,” Dustin mutters, casting a pained glance sideways toward Max. “I mean – I mean El and Will aren’t dead, is what I meant to say. They just had, like, a power outage or something.”

Mike half-laughs, with zero amusement, at the phrasing. A *power outage*. He thinks of El in the mall that night, trying to crush the can. He thinks of how nice it felt, when the Byers family was packing up to move, to have to help her get things down off tall shelves, and what an asshole that made him but he couldn’t seem to help it. Mostly, he thinks of how lost El has seemed to be powerless on top of being fatherless.

“It doesn’t *feel* like a power outage, though,” Max allows after a minute. She’s been quieter than usual, tossing a snide remark into the fray on occasion, but mostly contenting herself with just watching while eating the trail mix Steve brought “because you shitheads aren’t going to eat garbage the whole way there! If we’re skipping dinner to do this thing, you at least need protein.”

“What do you mean?” Steve asks, finding her in the rearview for as long as he dares take his eyes off the road.

“I mean, it’s – it’s just a few hours, right? Who would worry after just a few hours? Except ... nobody in the Party would let a few hours go

by without confirmation that everything's okay. Not after everything. They would answer the phone. They would have to know all that weirdness about hearing interference on the radio would make us nervous. I mean ... our shopping mall tried to kill us. We fought evil Russians. Interference on the line could be somebody's baby monitor or it could be, oh, I don't know, more evil Russians?"

"To name but one possibility," Robin agrees.

"I'm just, I'm saying they would answer the phone," Max repeats. "I wasn't worried until somebody hung up on Mike, but that's just weird. That does worry me a little."

"You think something's really wrong?" Mike asks. He was the one who initiated this whole rescue mission to begin with, insisting that El and Will would call him back unless something was wrong, that El wouldn't miss their radio time and just leave him hanging. But having confirmation from someone else that there really is reason to worry makes him even more anxious.

"Look, I'm not saying anything terrible happened," Max says. "I'm just saying, if they're holed up in the den watching TV and letting us worry like this, there's going to be some ass-kicking. All of them. Will, El, Jonathan. Don't think I won't go toe to toe with Mrs. Byers if I find out she's sitting around sipping wine while we drive three hours to check on their asses *just in case*."

She's about to say more when Robin sits up suddenly, smacking Steve with the crumpled map.

“Hey!” she says. “If I’m reading this right, there should be a road coming up on the left that can get us back to civilization!”

“What civilization?” Dustin asks. “Like, ancient Mesopotamian civilization? You have to be more specific with this guy!” He indicates Steve with one hand while half-laughing in Mike’s direction for solidarity. Mike rolls his eyes and looks away.

“No, like, *non*-nerd civilization, with phones and gas stations.” Robin says the last part pointedly while invading Steve’s space to look at the gas gauge. “Maybe we won’t die on some deserted country highway after all!”

“Hang on, when did die become a thing? I thought we were just going to run out of gas,” Steve protests.

“Running out of gas in the middle of nowhere is how the horror movie starts,” Robin chastises him. “And by the end of the movie, everybody’s dead.”

“Well, what if this isn’t a horror movie?”

“What?”

“I mean, what if it’s, you know, not aisle three? What if it’s aisle five?”

“Romantic comedy?” Robin sounds doubtful.

“The other side of aisle five,” Steve hastens to correct her.

“Animated children’s movies? Have you *heard* some of the language coming from your gaggle of children?”

“Shut up, they’re stressed.”

“I’m just saying, I don’t think animated children’s movies can be rated R for strong language and adult themes.”

“Uh, guys ...” Mike ventures.

“Maybe they’re aisle eleven,” Robin allows.

“Oh, they’re definitely aisle eleven.”

“What’s aisle eleven?” Lucas asks.

“Hey, you guys,” Mike tries again.

“Duh, sci fi,” Dustin answers.

“Oh, yeah,” Lucas says. “That’s us.”

Fed up, Mike uses a tone that he wishes could be described as a manly shout, even while he knows, immediately after the fact, that it was more of a high-pitched scream. “Guys!”

“What?” Steve explodes back at him. “Jesus, Wheeler, I’m trying to drive, don’t give me a heart attack!”

“You missed the turn.”

There’s a pause, and then Robin elbows Steve. “Turn around, Dingo, and try to pay attention.” As if she weren’t the biggest part of distracting him. Mike rolls his head backward again so that he’s looking upside down out the rear window. The sky is dark, and for some reason, darkness always makes him think of El. There’s probably some weird symbolism there – Will would know – but Mike doesn’t have the energy to look for it. All he has is a growing sense of dread that not all is well at the end of this road.

Notes for the Chapter:

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Does anybody know when the phrase "teamwork makes the dream work" was coined? Asking for Steve Harrington.

8. Bath

Summary for the Chapter:

In which there is affection

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Joyce catches one of El's arms and Jonathan catches the other, and she oofs to a stop just shy of smashing a rock against the school window. For a few seconds, her vision goes white with blind panic and she fights. She does not like *caught*. She does not like *oof*. But after a moment, she knows it's just the Byers' and that she's all right.

She has yet to stop crying, tears sticky and warm on her cheeks. She's sweating, too, from her run, and her leg and her lungs hurt. She tries to pull back the rock again, but Jonathan catches her fist in his palm, shaking the rock loose of her. It narrowly misses her toe. More tears come, the kind with snot and lack of breath. Everything is too much. Sad and hope and want. They are all too big to hold.

After a minute, Joyce's voice, steady this whole time, starts to filter in through the shrill humming in El's ears that started when the batteries scattered. "... why on Earth you think I'd let you break into the school building when you're already in trouble ..." Her voice fades out again, and back in: "... crying, El, honey, what's wrong? Will? What's wrong with her?"

Hop explained what a *loaded question* was back when she asked him if he liked anybody the way she liked Mike. El doesn't hear what Will's answer is for *what's wrong with her*, and she's kind of glad. She strains to escape the arms that are trying to hug her, that are blocking her from recapturing the rock. She's so close to a radio and time is important. What if he's gone before she can find him again?

It takes Will, both hands on her shoulders, staring straight into her eyes to get her to wait.

“Stop,” he says, with incredible calm.

“Hop –” she chokes out.

“I know. Stop.” He takes a breath so deep, she can feel it move his hands on her shoulders, and she feels like she needs to take the same breath, so she does. One breath at a time, she copies him down from sobbing to just breathing, with the occasional snuffle.

Now that she has air in her lungs, the shrill noise in her ears dims enough that she can hear voices again. There’s only Will’s, anyway. “Stop long enough to let me tell my mom what’s happening,” he pleads. “She can help. You know she can help. Jonathan, too. Let me tell them. Just give me forty-five seconds.”

She blinks uncertainly and swallows, heels of her hands scrubbing the tears away from her cheekbones.

“Count it down,” he prompts. “Go ahead. Forty-five. Forty-four.”

Hesitantly, with a shuddering breath, she says, “Forty-three.”

“Good.”

“Forty-two ...”

“Good. Good.” Rubbing a hand up and down her arm, Will turns to Joyce. El can hear their voices, but she focuses on her numbers instead of their words. Growing up, everything she did, she did alone. Years have passed, but she’s still learning it’s okay to let somebody else do things sometimes. She lets Will have the hard conversation with Joyce, and she counts backwards and breathes slowly. “Thirty-six. Thirty-five ...”

Somewhere around sixteen, she notices there aren’t any other voices anymore. Then Will’s voice joins hers, and they count the rest of the way down to zero. By the time they get there, she’s stopped crying completely and she and Will are holding hands. She can breathe and she can hear, and she knows she would have been in serious trouble if she’d managed to break a school window.

Joyce’s lips are pinched, cheeks and chin trembling with the effort of holding her expression steady. Her eyes are watery but hopeful.

“You could have just told me,” she says to El, pulling her into the tightest of hugs, “that you needed a goddamn radio.”

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“Nothing’s happening.”

“Give it time,” Jonathan says. “You just started.”

She gives it exactly seven seconds. Then, “Nothing’s *happening*.”

“El, come on. You’re worse than Will.”

“Hey!” Will protests.

“I mean, he’s not wrong,” Joyce allows. “Remember when you had to grow a bean plant for school? And you got mad a day after you planted it because ‘*it’s never gonna grow, Mom!*’”

“I was seven,” Will protests. “I’ve changed a bit since I was *seven*.”

El pulls off her blindfold, causing all three of the Byers to startle. She glares them quiet before she announces, frustration edging into her voice, “Nothing’s. *Happening*.”

Her plan is to try to find Hop again and to filter his voice through the radio, like she used to do back in the lab. She figures that must be what happened earlier, by accident. She must have pulled Hop’s voice through the radio without even meaning to. Her powers being gone was scary enough, but scarier still is that they’re coming back *different*. She can’t control them if they only pop up when she least expects it.

In disgust, she looks at the flimsy plastic walkie talkie Joyce had helped her find at Radio Shack. "This isn't as good as Will's," she says.

"Yeah, well, I saved for Will's for over a month before his birthday. I can't buy another one of those quite yet," Joyce says. "What, you think the radio's the problem?"

She thinks her brain and her powers are the problem, but she isn't sure how to explain, so she shakes her head once.

"Well, what, then?" Jonathan asks. "You think your powers need to recharge after what happened earlier?"

El shakes her head again. She has an idea.

"Bath," she says.

"Did you say bath?" Will asks. "You want to take a bath? *Now?*"

But Joyce and Jonathan are nodding slowly, eyes growing wide. "Bath," Joyce whispers. "Of course!"

"Okay, so now you've all gone crazy. What about a bath? Is that like a code?"

“Oh, that’s right, you weren’t there,” Jonathan says. “Well, I mean ... you were. Well, not exactly. I mean ...”

“It’s how I found you,” El said. “In ... you know. The Upside Down.”

Will’s features still for a second, the way they always do when anyone mentions the Upside Down or the Mind Flayer. “Oh,” he says.

Joyce is already in motion, snatching up her keys, scrambling for her wallet. “Okay. Okay, how are we going to do this? We need salt, we need a ... we need a big tub, or something ... we need ...” She searches for words, drawing pictures in the air with her hands.

El allows a tiny smile to creep on to her face. It’s not often she gets to supply a word for someone else. “Me?” she ventures.

“Well, we always need you.” Joyce meets her gaze, and for a moment, El feels warm, the way she used to when Hop did something nice for her, like making Eggos when he wanted to make vegetables, or pretending to hate the same soap opera character she hated, just to make her happy. *Affection. That can be your word of the day. It’s that warm ... you know, soft, or whatever ... kind of feeling that makes you want to make the other person happy. It’s why ... you know ... the damn Eggos. Now eat before they get cold, kid.*

“Affection,” El says.

“What?” Will’s still been muttering about bathtubs and seems to be

having trouble catching up.

But Joyce understands, pulling her into a one-armed hug, the other hand grabbing a jacket, which she slings around El's shoulders. "Let's do this," she says.

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They go to Murphy's for the pool, which is inflatable and not as big as last time.

"I hope this works," Jonathan says. "El's gotten bigger and this is a lot smaller than our first attempt."

"It's not a *lot* smaller," Joyce argues. "And she's not a *lot* bigger. She's just, you know. A couple of years older and about six thousand Eggos better fed." She pats El's arm.

The salt is a bigger problem. Without Hop to secure them road salt from the city, they're left with few options, until Joyce thinks of Quality Farm and Fleet.

"Don't horses eat salt?" she asks.

Six heavy paper sacks of "equine mineral mix" later, the Byers clan and their adopted Hopper head back to the house. When they walk in, the phone's ringing, but it stops before anyone can get to it, laden as they are with sacks of salt, a box with a picture of happy children

swimming on the side, and three boxes of Eggos “for fuel,” according to Will. At once, they all get to work, Will and Jonathan working on inflating the pool while El and Joyce move furniture to make room.

“It looks weird,” El says once they’ve got the couch and chairs pushed into the kitchen. The new house is larger than the old one, and the furniture that traveled with them from Hawkins has never felt like it can fill any of the rooms up all the way, but completely empty, the living room looks even worse. It looks cold. El can’t help but think of the cabin, after she and Joyce went back for Hop’s boxes. Destroyed, water-damaged, and blood-soaked, the cabin was a mess, but it was never *empty*. From the very first day, watching Hop knock the snow off his boots on the door frame, El felt like the cabin and her heart were both full of something warm.

“We’ll put it all back, sweetie,” Joyce reassures her.

The phone rings again, but it’s on the kitchen wall and there’s so much furniture blocking the doorway that no one can get to it in time.

“They can call back,” Joyce says. “We’ve got bigger fish to fry.”

“Fish?” El asks. She was hoping for Eggos for dinner.

“Just a saying,” Joyce explains. “It means we have other priorities.”

“Pri – orities.”

“Things that are important to us. A priority is a thing that is important to you. And people put them in order. Like a ladder. The top rung is their most important thing. Their top priority. And the one under that is still important, but a little less. And they just go down from there.” Joyce smiles kindly. “Right now, your dad is our top priority, yeah?”

El nods solemnly.

“Do you ... think he’s really ... you know. Out there?” she asks. “I didn’t ... make him up ... somehow?”

Joyce shrugs, giving her a sad sort of smile. “I don’t know, love,” she says. “I don’t know what to believe. I would be very surprised if anybody managed to survive what happened that day.” Her eyes darken with the memory, and El loops her arm through Joyce’s for support. “But if you heard his voice, well, it’s worth looking, then, right? And either way, we’ll know.”

“Either way,” El echoes.

9. Wrong

Summary for the Chapter:

In which things don't go as planned

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“Heavy.”

It's been hours. Hours of El floating in a tepid pool of saltwater – probably the only sensory deprivation unit ever to be decorated with cartoon pink flamingos around its border, or at least Will hopes so – with a small nosebleed and an even smaller voice. She's mostly quiet, only occasionally coming out with a single-word observation that doesn't make any sense outside her head. *Strange. Heavy. Crooked.*

The only time she says more than one word is when the phone rings, early on in her search. “Make it stop, make it *stop!*” She almost sounds like something hurts. Jonathan scrambles to vault across the scattered furniture, catching his foot between sofa cushions and spectacularly wiping out, managing to pop one of the wicker side panels out of the coffee table as he falls. On his way down, though, he is able to brush the phone's receiver with his fingertips, rocking it in its cradle so that it goes silent. El goes silent, too. Silent for hours and hours, shushing them at the slightest of noises.

At first, the tension in the room is high. Expectation keeps Will and his family fixed intently on El, waiting for something to happen. But eventually, Will catches himself watching the shadows move across the ceiling and down the wall. When it's dark enough that El's water looks black and bottomless, Jonathan gets up to plug in one of the lamps that's been unceremoniously shoved through the kitchen doorway. Sitting on the floor between rooms, it casts an unfinished-looking shadow that makes Will uneasy.

Only Joyce remains focused wholly on El, as though no time at all has passed. Several times, she's asked the teen if she's ready to stop, or at least take a break from her search. Every time, El has said a firm, "No."

Will's using his fingernail to draw a pattern in the wood paneling of the wall. It's flimsy particle board and easy to mark. He doesn't even look up when El says one of her random words.

"White?" It sounds like a question.

"White," Joyce repeats. She's taken to repeating El's single-word utterances as though they have some meaning, although, from the look on her face, she's just as bewildered as the rest of them. This time, though, El nods, her head sloshing the water gently.

"White," she repeats. "White hair."

Will sits up straighter and abandons his minor vandalism. Hair? This is the first time she's mentioned anything about a person. That has to mean she's moving in the right direction, doesn't it?

"White hair? Who has white hair?" Joyce asks. "Hopper?" Her tone is so hopeful that Will makes painful eye contact with Jonathan. His brother gives him back a half-smile that does little to reassure him.

But El shakes her head once, solemn. "Not Hop," she says. Her face draws and pinches, brows knitting together in the half-light. "It looks

...”

There’s a pause, and then El bolts upright in the pool, sloshing water onto the carpet and scaring the bejeesus out of the Byers family. Her hands scramble to get a grip on the blindfold. She rips it off and throws it as if it’s burned her. Her breath triples in speed, hitching hard in panic.

“Whoa, whoa,” Jonathan says as he and Will get to their feet. Joyce is closer and tries to pull El into a hug, but she jerks away, seeming not to want to be touched. Her hands are out to the sides a bit, as if she needs to balance herself. She blows out several hard breaths, pulling shaky ones back in to replace them.

“Honey, what happened?” Joyce asks. “What did you see?”

El’s eyes are huge and she won’t look at any of them. “Bad,” she whispers. A tear escapes down her cheek.

“Bad?”

“Bad man.”

“A bad man with white hair?” Joyce asks. “Sweetie, help me out. Can you tell me more? Do you know this bad man?”

El nods again, corners of her mouth turning down against more tears.

Her face is such an open book, Will can read her emotions even when he knows she doesn't know the words for them. He can read her emotions better than his own sometimes. This isn't sad, this look she's wearing. This is *wrecked*. Like everything is lost.

"Papa," she whispers. Somehow she fits a whole lifetime – a whole *childhood* – full of fear and pain and anger into that one tiny word.

"Brenner?" Joyce asks in dismay.

Will knows about Brenner, about the man El calls Papa. He's been filled in, in varying shades of theatrical prowess and unnecessary sound effects, by the rest of the party. He knows, the way you know that electricity is why your hair stands on end because your science teacher tells you so, that El was kidnapped as a baby by that man Brenner, that she was raised in a lab, used as a science experiment, and locked in the dark for misbehaving. He's been as righteously angry as anyone at the thought of his friend being abused and experimented on. But it isn't until right now, looking at her face in the off-kilter lamplight, that he realizes the difference between knowing what electricity is and feeling your hair stand on end.

His friend – the closest thing he's got to a sister – the strongest and bravest person he's ever *met* is absolutely terrified. He can see it in the muscles that twitch in her cheeks and chin as she tries to control her physical reaction. He can see it in her fingernails that press marks into her palms and the way all her muscles contract, as if she's trying to fold in on herself and become small. He can see it in her wide, wide eyes and the way they fill and then spill over, fill and then spill over, even though she's trying so hard not to cry. She looks younger – two and a half years younger – like all her time free of the lab has been a dream and she's about to wake up.

“Wrong,” El whispers. “Wrong. Joyce?”

“I’m right here, baby.”

El whips around at these words, eyes fixed on Joyce with something like gratitude, face crumpling as she begins to cry for real.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I did it wrong. I meant to find my *good* dad.”

10. Trauma

Summary for the Chapter:

In which a mind is made up

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Notes for the Chapter:

Just a short little chapter before I resume doing Tuesday things.

“Where is it? Where is it?” Joyce digs through the pile of papers that has accumulated in the basket by the door. It’s labeled “incoming mail,” thusly named during one of Jonathan’s many failed attempts to organize his mother, and it has since become a dumping ground of, essentially, all papers that enter the home, from sale papers to graded homework to ...

“A-ha!”

... foster care handbooks.

Holding the Xeroxed manual up in triumph, Joyce hurries to the circle of lamplight between the empty living room and the excessively furnished kitchen. Plopping herself down on the floor, she opens the manual, scanning the table of contents for one of the headings she vaguely remembers touching on in the painfully dull three-hour class Owens enrolled her in.

"She's Jane Hopper," he'd explained when Joyce tracked him down for school records. "I couldn't make another birth certificate appear quite as quick as it turns out this kid needs them."

"Hey," Joyce had admonished. "It isn't her fault."

"I know, I know. But the best I could do was foster momma, and if you're a foster momma, you have to take a foster care class and get certified."

"For real? Even though she's not actually a foster child?"

"For real. Unless you want her to actually become a foster child – with a real foster parent – you need to do this."

Of course Joyce had agreed. She'd do what she needed to for El. But having raised two boys, successfully parenting them through childhood illness and injury, schoolyard bullies, a learning disability, an abusive father, a divorce, a Demogorgon attack, some mind control, and an epic battle culminating in the complete destruction of a shopping mall, she felt a little overqualified to learn parenting next to Betsy Anne the Grandma Who Wants to Be There For The Children, Bless Their Sweet Hearts.

Three weeks in, she's changed her mind about Betsy Anne, who is one tough grandma and who asks just enough hard questions that Joyce is actually starting to think she might learn something from the class. It was Betsy Anne who asked whether children ever really heal from trauma, or whether they can still have problems years later – "and if those angels do still have bad memories, how do we fix it for them?"

Which is what Joyce wants to know now that El's in Will's bedroom,

too terrified to speak, wrapped in a blanket and being essentially force-fed Eggos by two well-meaning boys.

“Trauma, trauma, trauma ...” Joyce mutters, scanning the table of contents. She flips through the manual, hissing and sucking a paper cut, to the section on reliving trauma.

“It could be something as simple as a whiff of perfume at the grocery store,” she reads. *“As a foster parent, you might never know what it is that set off your child. They might not even know themselves.”* No, I think in this case we both have a pretty good idea. *‘But as you learn your child’s trauma reminders, you can help her to avoid them.’* Oh. Good. Now that I know it’s *traumatic* for her to run into her abusive parent who we thought was dead while she strolls around a pitch-black void that exists only in her mind, trying to find her good parent, who we also thought was dead, I can help her avoid it.” Her sarcasm falls on an empty room. She misses verbally sparring with Hop. She misses Hop, period.

“Hey, Mom?” Jonathan calls from Will’s bedroom. He sounds relaxed and casual – so relaxed and casual that her heartrate speeds up and she scrambles to her feet, leaving the foster care handbook in the circle of lamplight. She skirts the inflatable pool with its ridiculous flamingos and heads down the hall to where her boys are taking care of their sister.

“Hey, you guys,” Joyce says, leaning around the doorway. Her gaze immediately finds El, who is passively allowing Will to towel dry her hair. “How’re we doing?”

“Fine,” Will says.

“Fine,” Jonathan says.

“Bad,” El says. *Well, at least she’s talking*, Joyce thinks.

There’s going to be a wet spot on Will’s bed, and there are watery footprints all across the floor. For a moment, Joyce allows herself to be regular old parent-finding-a-mess-in-her-kid’s-bedroom tired, instead of the rather more complex, yet somehow increasingly familiar, my-family’s-idea-of-togetherness-is-fighting-evil-together tired.

“Hey, Mom, do you think maybe you can help El find some dry clothes?” Jonathan asks. Joyce looks where he’s looking and realizes El is shivering slightly, her skin pale and goose pimples. *Shit*, she thinks. The foster parent handbook shouldn’t have to tell her to warm the child up before worrying about reliving trauma. Hard to overcome trauma when you’ve frozen to death.

“Of course. Hang tight, sweetie.” She goes down the hall to El’s bedroom, which is one of the reasons she chose this house. The house overall is small and old, but El’s room has big windows and good light. It doesn’t feel closed in. El keeps it fairly neat, too, and there are only a couple of articles of clothing and a few comic books strewn about. Joyce takes dry underwear, fuzzy socks, and sweatpants from the cardboard box El still hasn’t unpacked, and then snags one of Hop’s oversized flannels off the bed.

Taking just a moment to herself, she holds the flannel to her face and breathes in deeply. *It could be as simple as a whiff of perfume at the grocery store*, her mind recites, eyes filling with tears. She allows them

to spill because it's quicker than fighting them, then brushes them away and resumes the business of parenting his daughter.

Back in Will's room, Joyce reaches for El, who is still sitting passively, eyes unfocused. "Let's get you dry and warm," Joyce says, reaching for the girl.

El's eyes slowly focus on Joyce, and then on the shirt in Joyce's hands. Hopper's shirt, soft earthy tones, worn thin. El stands so suddenly that she nearly knocks heads with Will on the way up. He jerks back a little and recaptures the towel from where she's knocked it out of his hand.

"No," El says with a firm shake of her head. It's amazing, and a little alarming, to watch her so quickly go from passively traumatized to aggressively determined. She presses her lips together and sets her chin, the image of defiance. Joyce knows that look. In this moment, she would swear the child in front of her is a Hopper by blood, not just by Eggo.

"No, you don't want dry clothes?" Joyce gives her a sympathetic grimace. "You have to be cold, honey."

"Try again," El says with another firm shake of her head. She swallows and her brow sinks. "I want ... to try again."

"Oh, sweetie, I'm not sure that's such a good idea." Joyce doesn't add that she literally just read in the parenting handbook not two minutes ago that this is *definitely* not a good idea.

“Hop,” El says in her measured way, “is out there.”

“We don’t know that,” Joyce carefully admits.

“I know it. He’s on the other side of Papa.”

“I don’t understand. Did you see him?”

“No. He’s on the *other* side of Papa.”

“Well, how do you know if you didn’t see him?”

“Mom, trust her,” Will says.

Jonathan looks at his brother and back at their mom. “I mean, yeah, trust her, but don’t let her do this. She’s exhausted.”

“My choice,” El says firmly. More quietly, she adds, “Hop tried again.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Eggos in the woods,” El says, more to herself than to anyone else. Then she lifts her chin. “I try again,” she says.

11. Ash

Summary for the Chapter:

In which there is relief

“Eleven,” Brenner says calmly, as though he doesn’t have a broken nose, “has a purpose. A very important purpose. It would be ... such a *waste* ... for her purpose to go unfulfilled.”

It strikes Hop that while much of El’s hesitant manner of speech can be attributed to being brought up in a dearth of language, she may also have adopted the style from the man she calls her Papa. Brenner pauses, not like El does, to search for words, but as though his words hold such importance that he has to give them time to sink in.

Nevermind that his actual words are totally b.s. Hop knows about waste, about purpose unfulfilled. Hop watched a little girl die of a terrible illness instead of growing up to give him gray hairs and laugh lines and grandkids. He’ll be damned if he’s going to watch another kid he loves have her life chewed up by something evil, whether it’s cancer or whether it’s this calm, white-haired menace in front of him.

Goddamn, it felt good to punch this asshole right in the face. He got in several good ones before the needle went into his neck, before the slow crawl of something warm and fuzzy untethered his motor skills from his mind. Now he’s propped against the wall of the cell, a captive audience to the ravings of this lunatic. He can’t move his hands, but just as soon as he can, he’s going to punch this asshole again, and once more for good measure. The thought keeps him going, like the promise of candy at the checkout keeps a little kid behaving at the grocery store.

“The thing is, Jim,” Brenner says amicably, and it gives Jim no shortage of pleasure that it comes out more like “Jib” on account of the swelling around his nose. “You and I, we have to work together to help Eleven. She’s ... adrift. She’s sick, Jim. She needs to be made well.”

Sick is not a word Hopper likes to play around with. He wants to ask Brenner what he means, but it’s like the needle to his neck turned off his words. He can only make a few halfhearted sounds. The terror of having thoughts he can’t articulate is real, and he wonders if this is how his daughter feels all the time – full of feelings and unable to speak them. His heart aches for her.

“Eleven’s time with you has ... changed ... her priorities.”

You mean she’s learned she’s not your property, Jim thinks.

“Since your apparent death,” Brenner says, “she’s become quite damaged.”

Damaged how? he wonders in a panic. And then realizes what *since your apparent death* means. It hits him like a brick upside the head. Brenner’s seen El more recently than Hop has. The injustice of it pulls words up from the swirling depths inside him:

“You ... stay ... way ... f’m her.”

Brenner raises one eyebrow, looking pleased. “Look at you,” he says.

“You’re uncommon, you know. A man who can talk when he shouldn’t have words. A man who looks at the rift between worlds and *jumps* without a moment’s hesitation. It’s little wonder she took up with you. She’s quite uncommon, herself. The product of years of work on the parts of myself and a few dedicated others. It’s important work, Jim. Work that could save the world, in a sense.”

He leans closer, and for the first time, Hop is able to see the anger beneath the surface. It swirls and seethes like something from the Upside Down, ready to drip through the cracks into this world and devastate everything. “It’s work we aren’t finished with. But we need your help.”

“Go ... ffffuck ... y’self.”

Brenner laughs. Then stops laughing abruptly, and swings. Unable to move to defend himself, Jim feels his head crack back against the wall of his cell. He’s already dizzy and the impact disorients him more than it should. He’s not sure for a moment which way is up, which is a dangerous feeling when you’ve lived through the Upside Down.

“We will bring Eleven home,” Brenner says. “The only question is whether you’ll be there to see it. Or whether you’ll still be here, rotting in this cell. The choice is yours, Jim.”

Hop would rather rot in this cell for a thousand years than help this man lay eyes on his child again. But he’s also not dumb enough to accept that his only two choices are the two Brenner’s outlined. Option three, he figures, is to play along until he’s out of this hellhole, then kill the *fuck* out of this asshole and go find his daughter.

"I'll be in touch," Brenner says, straightening suddenly. "You think about whether you want to see Eleven again. I'm offering you that chance. But I'm only going to offer once."

* * *
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"But I'm only going to offer once." Even as he speaks, Papa swirls away into blackness, like ash that only just stopped holding the shape of the thing that burned. Beyond him, clearly in her line of sight for the first time, is Hop, eyes closed, teeth worrying his lower lip, cheeks too sunk in and beard too long and wild to look like *her* Hop. But it's him, and just before he, too, swirls away into ash, he opens his eyes. El would swear, would *swear*, that he's looking right at her, that he somehow knows she's watching. He lifts one shaking arm toward her, but before she can take his hand, he crumbles into nothing. She cries out in anguish, reaching after him into the void.

"Hopper! *Hop!*" Her voice gains momentum and pitch and panic. "*Dad, wait!*"

"El?"

It's not Hop, though. It's ... someone. Someone who's not supposed to be here.

"Hop," she tries again, but he's gone. She's alone in the darkness, feet kicking ripples into black nothing.

“El, come on. Come back.”

She comes back like she's shot from a cannon. Frantic motion, escape. She's in the living room in the dark, in a flamingo pool full of horse salt and lukewarm water, flailing for purchase as she tries to scramble free of what holds her. Which, at this exact moment, is nothing but panic and anguish and ...

“Mike?”

He blows out a breath of relief. “Jesus, you have to quit doing that.” She can't figure out the words to answer before he's pulled her into a hug, cheek pressed to her wet hair. “I'm going to be the only freshman with gray hair,” he says.

She's so baffled by his unexpected presence and nonsensical words that she can only parrot him. “Gray hair?”

“You get gray hair when you worry.”

“I ... make you worry?”

“Um, news flash. Yeah, you do.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Ssh.”

“You’ll get wet,” she says against his ear.

“Ssh.”

“Hopper’s alive. Papa, too. I’m messing up your shirt.”

He holds her at arm’s length. “Hey, El?”

“Yes?”

“Ssh.” He pulls her back into a hug.

Around her, she can hear familiar voices greeting each other. Dustin, Lucas, Max, Steve and Robin. Will and Jonathan and Joyce. All at once, she feels so tired she could sleep for a week.

“Relief,” she remembers. “R – e – l – i – e – f. The feeling you get when something that hurt you or scares you goes away.” He was stroking her hair, but his voice was totally normal, like nothing had ever been wrong. It was that voice, more than anything, that allowed her to close her eyes even though there were tears leaking out of them. “Relief can make you tired, but sort of in a good way. Like when you realize you don’t have to do everything by yourself, because you’re not alone anymore. And you’re not alone, kid. You know it?”

"I know it."

"I know it," she says into Mike's shirt.

"Know what?" he asks.

She thinks about how to answer, how she can possibly make what she's feeling right now make sense to Mike. The *relief*. The *tired in a sort of good way*. The *not alone*.

She settles on, "Ssh."

12. Morning

Summary for the Chapter:

In which they wake

Mike has ended up with his girlfriend's feet. Her head is on Max's knees and she's snoring slightly while Max plays with her hair. Hypocrite. Max is the one who's always nagging Mike about El being her own person, and here she's petting her like she's a puppy. *Girls.*

No one else has given in to sleep, even though it's nearly morning. Mike's not surprised. The energy in the room is intense. Will's mom is in the kitchen, quietly talking on the phone – “... *to be fair, like nineteen of the twenty calls we didn't answer were my kids' friends from Hawkins, you only called once and we were a little busy, Murray ...*” Jonathan and Steve are trying, and spectacularly failing, to maneuver the flamingo-adorned kiddie pool through the front door without spilling any of the water. There's a saltwater trail of failure soaking into several square feet of olive-colored carpet. Dustin and Robin are putting the rest of the furniture back where it goes, under Will's direction, while Lucas hurries to sit casually on every piece of furniture just before they attempt to pick it up.

Only El is down for the count, and it makes sense, if she's been using her powers. Especially if her powers are weak enough that she has to resort to the bath like in the old days. He can't believe she's right here in front of him. His fear has been growing since the radio cut out, so many hours ago now. But she's okay. She's alive and resting. In serious danger, of course, because it's El. But alive and resting and solid beneath his hands.

The overall mood in the room is a mix of anxiety and hope. The fact that Hopper is alive has bolstered everybody's spirits, even though he

and El both are in danger. But El has seemingly taken the news that Hopper is alive, and the arrival of her friends, as a signal that she can rest for a minute, and her exhausted body has responded accordingly. A while ago, Jonathan noticed how tired she was getting and dragged the couch back out of the kitchen for her, and that was that. She hasn't shifted once since she tipped over onto Max's knees and pulled her feet up on the couch more than an hour ago. Max, to her credit, hasn't moved either, even though this is the longest Mike's seen her sit still since Starcourt.

"It's kind of scary about Brenner, huh?" Max says softly to Mike, never stopping in her stroking of El's hair.

"Not kind of," Mike says. "It's scary. *Really* damn scary."

"I mean, he locked her up like some ogre locking up the princess in the castle."

"Sure," Mike agrees, "if the princess in the castle had her head shaved and was forced to hurt animals with her mind."

Max blanches. "She hurt animals?"

Mike's hand stills for just a moment on El's calf, and then he resumes rubbing methodically from knee to ankle. With each pass of his hand, he can feel her scars. "No," he says, wincing as he remembers one of the nights she radioed him fresh from a nightmare, the night she told him about the screaming cat and the little room at the end of the long hallway. "She let them punish her instead."

Max shudders. Mike thinks it's in fear until he takes a better look at Max's face.

"Hey," he says, alarmed at the rage he sees there. "It's okay. She's got us now."

Max swallows carefully. "Yeah."

Mike keeps watching Max, who he doesn't always give a fair chance. He grudgingly likes her in spite of how hard he tries not to, even considers her part of the Party now, if only in a supporting role. But it seems like she's constantly competing for El's attention and undermining his intentions with her. It's only now, watching how upset she's getting on her friend's behalf, that he recognizes he maybe hasn't given her a fair shake regarding her own intentions. Maybe she doesn't *just* do what she does to conspire against him.

"You care a lot about her, don't you?" he asks quietly, watching Max as she strokes El's hair methodically, her hand the only part of her that isn't shaking with fury at what Mike's told her.

Max looks up, eyes shining, but her tone is as snide as ever. "*Duh*, she's my best friend?"

Mike rolls his eyes. So much for bonding with Max. *Girls*. But he still feels a little warmer toward Max than he has in a long while. El can use all the love in her life she can get. It's the only way he knows to offset all the loss.

Once the room is in order, people start to sink into newly-arranged furniture. The mood in the room is still hopeful, but it's also dawn and they've all been awake all night. Mike catches himself yawning. The next time he blinks, it's lighter outside than it was a second ago and he thinks he might have actually fallen asleep for a minute.

Looking around the room, he realizes that, yeah, he definitely did fall asleep, and not just for a minute. Soft morning light is seeping in between the blinds, drawing sunshine lines on the relaxed faces of El and Max. The room is dotted with sleeping friends. Dustin's balanced on the arm of the loveseat, listing dangerously sideways, head wedged into the space between Robin's shoulder and the back of the couch. Mike's pretty sure that if Robin moves, Dustin will hit the floor. Robin's knees are drawn almost all the way up to her chin, and her feet are on Steve's knees. Steve has his head back against the back of the loveseat, mouth open and a pretty spectacular snore emanating from its depths.

Mike lets his sleepy eyes travel to the recliner, where Will is perched on one arm and Lucas is draped across the other. Even asleep, Will looks different than the last time Mike saw him. Older, maybe? Or maybe just more tired. Mike feels a longing he can't quite put a name to, but it has something to do with his basement and D&D and a time when things were so much simpler. Every time he looks at Will, he feels something unsettled swirl in his stomach. He doesn't want to call it guilt, in case that makes him – well, *guilty* – but he can't help but think of their fight. Of the hurtful words he couldn't catch even as they flew out of his own mouth. He has no idea how to make things right, and the thought makes him tired and sad. But this isn't the time to go down that rabbit hole, he figures.

In the kitchen, Mike can see Jonathan and Mrs. Byers sitting at the table. Mrs. Byers has a steaming cup of coffee in front of her, and

she's writing furiously on a pad of paper. Jonathan is leaning toward his mother, talking softly. Mike wonders if either of them slept at all. He would be willing to bet a big fat no on that one.

He's found everyone now, all accounted for. But Mike's gaze continues to travel, past the kitchen door, past the darkened entrance to the hall.

A foot disappears down the hallway.

Adrenaline slams Mike's heart against his ribs. Suddenly wide awake, he carefully lifts El's legs and settles them on the couch. Standing, he creeps slowly toward the hallway. Everyone's here in sight. Everyone's accounted for. If someone really just snuck down the hallway, they aren't supposed to be here.

Mike takes a deep breath, grits his teeth against the fear, and steps through the doorway to the darkened hall.

It's empty. But just when he thinks maybe he was dreaming, the last door on the left clicks shut.

"Hey!" he shouts. "Who's back there?"

A thud behind him makes him whirl to face danger, but it's only Dustin, who's rolled off the couch and hit the floor now that Robin's jumped, startled, to her feet.

“What’s going on?” Jonathan asks, catching up to Mike in the hallway, Mrs. Byers on his heels.

“Somebody’s here,” Mike says. “Somebody’s in the house.”

“What do you mean?”

“What does it *sound* like I mean? There’s a *person* here who is *not* supposed to be here! They went into the room at the end, on the left! I saw them!”

Before Mike’s finished talking, Jonathan has pushed ahead of him, using an arm to block Mike or any of the other younger boys who have caught up to him from starting down the hallway. “Wait here,” he mutters. Mike looks from Jonathan to the sofa, where Max is helping El sit up. El’s rubbing sleep from her eyes, looking dazed.

“What’s going on?” she asks in that serious voice of hers.

“Ssh,” Max says. “Mike thought he saw a boogeyman, let the boys check it out.”

El’s brows knit together. “Boog – boogey man?”

“Scary dude,” Max explains.

Mike sees the moment El wakes up enough to realize there might be danger, and she is all at once on her feet, on alert. He moves toward her.

“Hey,” he says. “It’s okay. Let Jonathan check it out.”

“Is it Papa?” she asks, voice a little huskier than usual.

“No,” he says, even though he has no idea.

“It could be,” Max cautions.

Mike rolls his eyes in irritation at her. “*Max!*”

“Well! Unlike you, I don’t think the best way to make her feel better is to lie to her!”

“I don’t *lie* to her! I just don’t think there’s any reason to scare her when we know Brenner was in Russia like six hours ago. There’s no way he can be here already!”

“Unless,” Will says.

Oh, God, not you too, Mike thinks, but he doesn’t say it, because

saying words to Will hardly ever ends well anymore.

“What if he didn’t travel in ... you know, *this* world?”

“Oh, shit,” Dustin says.

Mike has to agree. The thought of Brenner creeping through the Upside Down is enough to make the hair on the back of Mike’s neck stand up. Possessive or not, he stations himself directly in front of El, between her and the hallway. He has to lean a little to see Jonathan’s progress past Steve, who is using his arms spread wide to block Dustin and Lucas from getting any closer. Behind Mike, Will and Max take up stations on either side of El, hemming her in. Robin’s holding up a mop like it’s a baseball bat, rather ineffectively trying to look menacing. Both Jonathan and Mrs. Byers are almost to the last door on the left. Mike backs up, moving El back with him, ready to bolt for the door with her in tow if somebody dangerous comes out of that room. Now he’s totally out of sight of the door at the end of the hall. He can only listen to the pointed silence there.

There’s the creak of a floorboard, the click of a doorknob turning. Mike holds his breath and waits.

13. Visitors

Summary for the Chapter:

In which two doors open

Chapter 13: Visitors

In which two doors open

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El expects something to happen ahead of her, down the hall. She does not expect something to happen directly behind her at the front door. As it turns out, something happens in both locations at the same time. The firm knock at the front door, coupled with the bedroom door at the end of the hall flying open, makes everyone jump and at least two people scream. El thinks one of them might have been Steve, but she won't mention it to him later because Hop talked about *manners*.

At the sound of the screams, the knock at the front door comes again, this time even more insistent. A big part of El wants to leap into Mike's arms and hide. But the bigger part of her wants to step in between her friends and danger like she's done so many times before. She can't protect them, though. *For one thing*, she doesn't know which threat is more dangerous right now, and *for two things*, she doesn't know if she has any powers. They're coming back in patches. She remembers this, a little, from when she was very small. She remembers not being able to control her powers, but then Papa made her work at it, Papa made her practice and practice and ...

Papa's alive.

The knowledge is like when you run too fast and you get what Dustin calls *a stitch in your side*, only not the kind of stitches she got in her leg after Starcourt. This stitch is a sharp pain under her ribs that makes it difficult to breathe. The closest word she can think of is *fear*, but fear is a little word and this is not a little feeling.

She is certain – *certain* – that Papa is going to walk into view at any moment. He won't be moving quickly, because he always has everything under control. His coat will flap gently with each step and he'll smell like aftershave and laundry detergent, two of the hundreds of words she didn't know the last time she saw him, so she thought that was just how Papa smelled.

Hop smells like cigarettes and pine trees and usually a little bit of sweat and Hop is also alive and if Papa being alive is a stitch in her side, then Hop being alive is a kiss and a band-aid for her heart.

"A kiss and a few band-aids and you're good as new." He delivers both, awkwardly but with plenty of love. "Geez, kid, how did you take this much skin off your knees in one go? I know you're too old for a kiss and a band-aid, but work with me here. You scared the crap out of me. New rule: You can use your powers to get stuff out of the high cabinet, as long as you remember your own strength and don't rip off my damn doors. No more climbing on furniture."

And as certain as she is that Papa is about to walk through the door, that's how scared she is that Hop never will. It's not fair. Her brain expects her bad parent to turn up at any moment, but is still convinced she'll never see her good parent again.

Mike's putting pressure on her shoulders and she realizes dimly he's trying to move her toward the kitchen, out of the main path of activity in the house. She doesn't realize for the longest moment that he's talking to her, and that's when it sinks in that she's having trouble hearing, and focusing, through the terror that Papa has come for her. The activity around her seems like it's moving too slowly to be real, like she's having one of those awful dreams where she's being dragged down the hallway toward The Bad Room and everything slows down and she can't move or run or kick or scream. She tries to tell herself to focus, that there's danger, that her friends need her, but all she can focus on is that the niloleum-or-whatever-it's-called on the kitchen floor has marks pressed into it from where some other family's table used to sit. Their table was larger than the Byers'. It had smaller feet.

It takes Steve appearing next to Mike, putting both hands on her shoulders and leaning down to look her right in the face before she is able to wake up a little to the situation. "Hey," he says. "You're safe. It's not him, all right? It's not the bad guy, it's just Erica Sin-fucking-clair."

And he's right, she realizes. Erica Sinclair has emerged from the room at the end of the hallway, looking sassy and unbothered by the fact that she just *scared the crap* out of an entire household. Joyce heads for the front door to assess the danger there, so El still doesn't relax, ready to at least try to use her powers, in case it's Papa at the front door. In the hall, Lucas and Dustin are quizzing Erica, voices raised in frustrated disbelief. As if from far away, El can catch bits of Erica's voice – "*thought you nerds might need some backup*" and "*if you want something done right, you gotta do it yourself*" and "*what's a little time in the trunk of a car after you've spent the night in a Russian elevator?*" -- but she can't understand anybody's words very well right now. Her breath is hitching again. She's tired of not being in control of her own breath.

Joyce is at the door now, and El is torn between the instinct to run and hide somewhere small and not ever let him find her, and to get between her friends and the man who's come looking for her. To protect them from the trouble that follows her everywhere she goes.

Limbs trembling, air refusing to make its way into her lungs, she decides, and steps forward to protect her friends from Papa.

But when Joyce looks out the window through the plastic that's still half taped in place and half peeling down, abandoned, she doesn't react like it's Papa. She swears two or three times, under her breath, while raking her fingers through her hair to try to make it look like she's brushed it. Instead, it stands up even more than it was before. In the hall, Erica and Lucas are still *butting heads*, which Hop says is something that is normal in families. Joyce turns and hisses, in a whisper that is somehow loud enough for El to hear all the way in the kitchen, "*Shut them up and act happy!*"

Steve leaves her with a last squeeze around the shoulders and goes to quiet the argument in the hall while Joyce unlocks the door. She would never unlock the door for Papa. It can't be Papa. It isn't Papa. He isn't here. He isn't here. She didn't even realize she was fighting Mike's grip on her until she stops and he's able to pull her out of sight into the corner of the kitchen.

"Mrs. Bennett, hello," Joyce says in a pleasant voice with only a hint of a tremor to it.

"Who's Mrs. Bennett?" Max whispers. El shrugs, wide-eyed.

“Hello, Mrs. Byers. Is ... this a bad time?”

“No, no. Of course not. We were just having a little sleepover with Jane’s friends.”

“*Jane?*” Max mouths wordlessly. El shrugs again. Joyce never calls her Jane.

“I heard screaming,” the stranger says.

“Oh, just kids being kids,” Joyce says. “You know how they are.”

“Well, I just wanted to stop by and check on Jane and see how things are going. I heard there was some trouble at the school last week? You know, any time you have behavioral issues with a foster child in your care, you can always call the agency. We’re here to support you and Jane.”

Max doesn’t make a sound, but her mouth starts moving like she’s saying *shit* and *fuck*. Mike starts running nervous hands through his hair, and even Robin is shaking her head like this is something bad. Robin and Max begin straightening the kitchen, frantically and silently. El has never seen anybody do house-cleaning frantically and silently before. She’s missing something and she’s not sure what it is, but she’s still focused on bringing her heartrate down to normal and controlling her breathing. *Not Papa. It’s not Papa. He’s not here.*

“Where is Jane?” the new voice in the living room asks. “I’d like to talk to her.”

El looks at Mike and shakes her head. She doesn’t want to talk to any strangers. She’s scared and tired and her words are all mixed up. Confusion makes her eyes fill with tears. She doesn’t want to talk to any strangers.

“Of course,” Joyce says. “Let me just get her. Have a seat. *Oh*, don’t sit there, that chair’s wet. We had a ... bit of a spill. Watch your step, the carpet’s a little wet, too. I was just about to clean it up.” Joyce is lying and it never occurred to El that Joyce might lie and she doesn’t like it. If Joyce has to lie to the lady in the living room, then maybe the lady is *bad* even though she’s not Papa.

“Jane, honey?” Joyce says as she enters the kitchen. Her eyes widen slightly at the sight of El trembling in Mike’s arms in the corner of the kitchen. Then she winces in sympathy and steps close enough that she can talk low.

“You okay, sweetie?”

El blinks, swallows. Thinks about nodding but decides not to lie and shrugs her shoulders instead. *I don’t know*.

“She was scared it was – you know, *him*,” Mike says darkly.

Joyce pulls El into an embrace that is firmer than her usual soft hugs.

"I will not let him get to you," she says, with such certainty that El thinks maybe it's really possible. "I will not, honey. Okay?"

"Okay." El swallows hard and gathers herself. "I won't let him get to you, either, okay?"

Joyce holds her at arm's length and smiles, growing teary-eyed. "Okay," she says. "It's a deal."

"Deal?"

"Like a promise that goes both ways."

"A both-way promise," El echoes. She nods seriously. A both-way promise sounds good. That way she doesn't have to decide whether to protect her friends or to be protected. She can do both.

14. Endangerment

Summary for the Chapter:

In which a certain government employee dearly needs some Tylenol or possibly a drink

Mrs. Bennett knows in her head it's Sunday, but in her heart she feels it must surely be Monday. Certainly, things are going wrong like they do on Mondays.

First off, she decided to be polite and remove her shoes at the front door of the Byers home, which immediately resulted in her socked foot becoming soaked in an unknown liquid (and in her line of work, an unknown liquid is never anything good), and now she's preoccupied with the need to go out to the car and rip off her tainted sock, but she can't leave yet because there was screaming. Which, of course, is one of the other things that's gone wrong. Joyce Byers may think she's convincing, chalking the screaming up to "kids being kids," but Lorraine Bennett has been in this field long enough – not to mention momming and aunting and grandma-ing enough young people – to know the difference between "kids being kids" screams and "something's wrong" screams, and these were definitely the latter.

She's already working on a Sunday because she's only just gotten a report from the school on Friday about Jane Hopper's suspension for fighting, even though Joyce, if she read her handbook – which she definitely hasn't, or it wouldn't currently be discarded on the floor between the kitchen and the living room -- would have known to call the agency as soon as it happened. Now Mrs. Bennett, who already has three separate court hearings to attend tomorrow because the universe, or possibly somebody at the courthouse, hates her and wants her to have a migraine by noon on a Monday, has to come up with a behavior plan for Jane Hopper because the vice principal is pushing for expulsion.

And now, while she waits for Jane, with her wet sock and her sour mood, she starts feeling like something is definitely amiss in this house.

There's activity from somewhere down the hall. She can hear children whisper-fighting and she's pretty sure she's heard the words "Russian elevator" more than once. Quite clearly, she hears a young but confident voice proclaim, "If you want shit done right, you gotta do it yourself," which would be cause for concern even if it wasn't followed by two or three other voices shushing the speaker along with a muffled *hmmph* that sounds suspiciously like someone's put their hand over the speaker's mouth. A door closes somewhere, and the voices get quieter but do not stop completely.

Mrs. Bennett is weighing her need to go investigate the hallway situation against the dangers of navigating the mystery-dampened carpet in her socked feet when, simultaneously, the subject of her visit enters from the kitchen, and the lamp on the end table dims. Mrs. Bennett recognizes Jane from the outdated and somewhat blurry photo in her file. It's one of her gifts, recognizing children from the terrible photos that get stapled to stacks of paper that land on her desk. Another of her gifts is recognizing in a child the signs that they are afraid to talk to her in present company. Upon surveying Jane, her suspicions are immediately aroused. This child is frightened, and she won't meet Mrs. Bennett's eyes. She's looking steadfastly at the lamp.

"Hello, Jane," Mrs. Bennett says pleasantly.

"Hi." No eye contact. No inflection, either, just a flat, quiet *hi*. Behind Jane, Joyce Byers has a hand on the youngster's shoulder, and

Mrs. Bennett wonders what she's communicating with that touch.

"Mrs. Byers, is there someplace that Jane and I could speak privately?"

Jane becomes even more tense at the request, her whole body trembling slightly, but Joyce nods. "Of course. You know what, you all stay here. I'll go help the kids clean up from our sleepover." Joyce smiles stiffly at Mrs. Bennett, much more genuinely at Jane, and squeezes the child's shoulder before she lets go. Jane doesn't seem frightened of Mrs. Byers, which makes Lorraine wonder just who or what the young girl is so afraid of.

There's a scuffle and a bit of whisper-screaming in the hallway before Mrs. Bennett hears a door open and close, and it gets a lot quieter in the living room.

"Come have a seat, Jane," she says when she's sure they're alone.

Jane obediently walks closer, perching on the very edge of the loveseat, as far from Mrs. Bennett on the couch as she can get. The light dims again with an audible buzz. Atmospherically, it's an uneventful Sunday, cold but sunny, so the electricity problems can't be blamed on the weather. Mrs. Bennett wonders about the wiring. It's an older house. The wiring could be a fire hazard. It will have to be checked out.

"So, Jane, how are things going?" Mrs. Bennett turns her attention from the electricity to the subject of her visit. Jane is a skinny girl with a pinched look about her features, like someone who has

frequently been hungry. She's wearing a severely oversized flannel with baggy sweatpants, and her hair is tangled and frizzy. There are dark circles of exhaustion under her eyes.

Jane shrugs. She has yet to make eye contact.

"Was your sleepover fun?" Mrs. Bennett tries again.

"My friends came," Jane says, very quietly, but her fear seems to ease some when she talks about her friends.

"Do you have a lot of friends?"

"Hop –" Her voice breaks and she swallows and breathes for a minute. The lamp buzzes and brightens before it dims. "Hop says when it comes to friends, it's quality over quantity. Quality means how good something is and quantity means how many something is."

"I see. So you have quality friends, then?"

"Yes."

"What about your foster family? Mrs. Byers and her sons? Are they quality friends as well?"

Jane finally, finally meets her gaze, with large, watery brown eyes. As fragile as she seems, there is a defiance about her when she says, "Yes. Lots of quality."

"I'm glad to hear that." She's being genuine. It's always good to hear that a foster child likes her current placement. Still, Mrs. Bennett has been at this job long enough that her concerns are only growing as she speaks with Jane. Though in her teens, the young lady in front of her speaks like someone much younger, in a voice stilted by disfluency and threaded through with fear.

"Can I go now?" Jane asks.

"Well, I was hoping that first you might tell me what happened at school."

Jane glances up nervously. "I needed a radio, but Joyce took me to the store."

Mrs. Bennett frowns. "I don't follow, Jane."

"We bought a radio instead."

"I was referring to the fight."

Very quietly, Jane says, "Oh."

Before Mrs. Bennett can ask a follow-up question, she's distracted by a door opening and closing somewhere in the hall. Raised voices carry out.

"You're not the only one who can run off and do stupid shit, Lucas! You act like I'm a baby, but I'm eleven!" Jane tenses sharply at the mention of the other child's age. The anger and poor impulse control coupled with the child's inappropriate language clues Mrs. Bennett in that perhaps she ought to check on the other children associated with this home. She isn't sure who the "quality friends" are, but they may also need protection.

"Is that one of your friends I hear?" Mrs. Bennett asks.

Jane swallows and nods.

"She sounds angry."

Another nod.

"Do your friends get angry often?" Mrs. Bennett asks. Maybe these friends are fighters and that's why the seemingly shy, frightened girl in front of her broke another child's bone at the school last week. Mrs. Bennett resists the urge to pinch the bridge of her nose against the headache she can feel coming on. Something isn't adding up.

Jane shrugs. Not a big talker, this kid.

“Can you tell me about the day you got in the fight?” Mrs. Bennett asks.

Jane bites her lip. She shakes her head once.

“You can’t?”

Another head shake.

“Can you explain why you aren’t able to talk about it?”

“Hop –”

Another door slams somewhere in the house and Jane jumps. Mrs. Bennett turns, startled, to face the hallway as an angry-looking child storms into the living room, only to be caught and pulled back by a pair of arms from the hallway.

Mrs. Bennett stands, talking a couple of steps toward the hallway. “Is everything okay down there?” she asks.

Jane’s breath quickens and she says, “Aaron made Will sad.”

“I’m sorry?”

“At school.”

Encouraged that she is maybe going to get at least part of the story, Mrs. Bennett tears her attention from the fading sounds of chaos in the hall. “Oh?”

“He said a bad word to Will. He made him sad.”

“And Will is your foster brother?”

“My brother.”

“So Aaron made your brother sad. How did that make you feel?”

“Angry.”

“So you pushed him.”

“Yes.”

“Did you mean for him to fall down the stairs?”

Jane shrugs.

“You don’t know?” Mrs. Bennett gently challenges her.

“I didn’t mean to push him,” Jane says. “But he’s bad. So I’m not sad he fell down the stairs. Can I go now?”

Before Mrs. Bennett can respond, there’s a loud popping sound that makes she and Jane both jump, and the lamp’s lightbulb shatters. At the same time, the overhead lights in the kitchen brighten to an almost unbearable wattage. Jane’s eyes go wide and her breathing hitches as though she’s facing down something much more terrifying than faulty wiring in a decrepit old house.

“It’s okay, Jane,” Mrs. Bennett tries to soothe her. “Maybe I should talk to your foster mother about the wiring before I go, huh?”

“W - wiring?” Jane’s voice trembles.

“Yes, sometimes faulty wiring can cause the lights to go haywire.”

“Hey wire?”

“To act unpredictably.”

“Oh.” Jane doesn’t look convinced and Mrs. Bennett wonders if she knows what *unpredictably* means.

A door in the hallway bangs open again and Mrs. Bennett decides she’s had enough. She stands and starts toward the hallway, dismayed when her dry sock joins the wet one in being marked with a mystery liquid. Before she can make it to the hallway, the angry eleven-year-old pops out, looking less angry now and more smug.

“All *right*,” the child calls over her shoulder. “Commence Operation Child Endangerment: The Revival!”

“Oh my god, Erica, shut *up*!”

Well, this voice has come from the kitchen, which Mrs. Bennett had assumed was empty. A tall, awkward boy appears, stepping over the foster parent handbook to meet the smaller child – Erica – at the entrance to the hall.

Mrs. Bennett moves forward again, so abruptly that Jane startles backwards. Mrs. Bennett immediately feels guilty, but not so much that she’s derailed from her purpose. “Okay, that’s it,” she says. “How many children are in this house, and what is this I hear about child endangerment?”

“Oh, hi,” the sassy eleven-year-old says. “Don’t worry. It’s just a

nickname. There's no endangerment here, and I'm *not* a child. I'm Erica." The confident girl extends a hand. "And you are?"

This child is oddly commanding, and Mrs. Bennett finds herself taking the offered hand. The palm in hers is mysteriously sticky, the grip firm as a grown man's, the handshake emphatic enough to exacerbate her carpal tunnel syndrome.

"Don't mind me," Erica says. "I'm just on my way out to the breaker box to see if I can figure out why the lights keep going out."

"Hey wire," Jane says softly. The tall boy from the kitchen has joined her on the loveseat, and he's holding both her small hands between his larger ones.

Although a small part of Mrs. Bennett's brain believes that Erica is actually capable of diagnosing and addressing an electrical problem, it really is her responsibility to put an end to this.

"Young lady, I don't think you should be playing around with the breaker box."

"Who said anything about playing?"

"Erica." Joyce Byers reenters the room. "Sweetie, I appreciate your need to help. Why don't you go check the utility room for a box of new lightbulbs? I'll check on the breaker box. And ... you know, other things."

The kitchen lights give an almighty fit of flickering just then. Mrs. Bennett truly doesn't know where to start. Erica has gone down the hallway, presumably to look for lightbulbs, while the lanky boy who's been sitting with Jane is on his feet, trying to recapture Jane's hands.

Jane is walking slowly toward the kitchen, looking at the lights, seemingly mesmerized.

"I don't know what's going on in this house," Mrs. Bennett says, "but I think we need to have a conversation about what's best for –"

"Ssh!" This comes from Jane herself, who whirls, finger to her lips, to face Mrs. Bennett. Then quickly returns her gaze to the kitchen.

"Jane, I –"

"*Shh!* Please." Jane fixes her with a stare for a moment before turning to walk into the kitchen. She doesn't stop till she's standing directly below the light.

It flickers again. Almost rhythmically. Then stops.

It flickers. Then stops.

Jane turns, not to Mrs. Bennett but to Mrs. Byers, eyes wide and alight with something new. Not fear, not the misery that has, until now, been evident in her every move. Something very different. Something hopeful.

“It’s code,” she says in wonder. “It’s code. It’s *him*.”

15. Rules

Summary for the Chapter:

In which there is contact

“It’s a fragile connection. You may only have moments to make contact.”

“What is all this hooey?” Hop waves a hand at the vials of liquid in various shades of *oh hell no* and the whirring, sparking machines. He’s a pretty handy guy – okay, maybe not with a truck, but at least around the house – but he doesn’t recognize any of the equipment taking up three quarters of the room. He’s pretty sure none of it exists outside the hellscape that is his life.

“Focus,” Brenner says, sounding irritated. “You may only have *moments*.”

“I don’t understand, though. How is all this mess gonna put me in touch with El? Isn’t that why you need her so bad, because you can’t recreate her talents on your own?”

Jim’s hope in pretending to partner with Brenner was that the son of a bitch would take him out of the building, maybe even out of the country, giving him a chance to escape. But so far, all that’s happened is that he’s been led to a bunker-like lab within the prison. As far as he can tell, he’s actually deeper within the building than before. *Some escape, Jim*, he thinks. Not only is he still fighting off the

affects of some lingering drug, but he's buried himself in the stony center of a building that seems to go on for miles.

And now, having been unable to escape, he's expected to make contact with his daughter. To sell her out.

"If we can generate enough power," Brenner explains, "we can connect with Eleven. Her power is motivated by ... affection. She's more likely to hear you calling than me."

"Ooh." Hopper exaggerates a pained expression at Brenner. "Hurts to admit, huh? Our kid likes me better than you?"

"*Like* is unimportant," Brenner says smoothly. "*Need* is important. Eleven needs me. She doesn't yet know how much." There's something ominous about the way he says it, even more ominous than just your run-of-the-mill evil government scientist veil of disrepute.

"So you want me to, what? Ask El for her coordinates?" *Not in ten thousand years*, he thinks, but doesn't say.

"Not necessary," Brenner says. "At this stage, *where* is unimportant. I only need to know that she's able to function."

Hopper thinks of a kid in the woods, paralyzed with fear, too exhausted to speak. He thinks of the times he's fed her and washed her face and tied her shoes because she was simply beyond the limits

of her coping. To him, a kid who's able to function is the kid he's known their last year together – courageous, defiant, discovering her own style. Kissing boys and having sleepovers with friends and rebelling against her old dad.

To Brenner, a kid who's able to function is one who isn't a kid at all, but a means to a violent end. A weapon of war.

“So you're not trying to capture her, you're, what, just taking some data?”

Brenner looks at him, feigning surprise at his tone. “I am a scientist, Jim.”

“Yeah, well, she's not your little experiment anymore.” The words stir up an awful pang of guilt. He remembers referring to her in a similar way to Brenner years back, before he knew El, before she was his kid. He'd offered up her location as a bartering tool. At the time, it had been the only way he could think of to save Will, but he's never gotten over the guilt and he thinks he'll likely go to his grave – perhaps sooner than later, but either way – still trying to make it up to her.

“She was never little,” Brenner says. “Her abilities, her potential – she has always been vastly more important than you have the capacity to understand.”

“I damn well know she's important,” Jim says, in a voice that drops low and dangerous. Petty criminals in Hawkins rethink their life of teenage crime to this voice. In a distant past, much less petty

criminals changed their tune in a bigger city for the same reason. “But you know what?” Jim adds. “You’re wrong. She *was* little. I was there. She was skinny and too small for a kid her age, and she was afraid of the dark, and small spaces, and her eyes goddamn lit *up* when she saw something with glitter and sequins on it. She was a little girl. She’s still a little girl. She’s not your weapon. She’s not yours, period.”

“At the age of seven,” Brenner says, “Eleven channeled the voice of an enemy of the state through a Mr. Microphone toy. Because of her contribution, we were able to prevent an otherwise certain attack on United States soil. Physically, yes, she was small in stature. *I* was there. But Eleven has *never* been little.”

“Yeah, well, I guess we’re going to have to agree to disagree,” Hop says. “Because she’s *my little girl* now. And you’re not getting anywhere near her ever again, you son of a bitch.”

Brenner sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose for a moment, as though developing a slight headache from this mild inconvenience. “Then what are we doing here, Jim? I thought you’d decided you wanted to see her again?”

“Of course I want to see her again. I want to see her healthy and whole and *free*. Which means there is no way – *no* way in this godforsaken world – that I’m going to help you find her.”

Brenner looks at Jim pityingly. “Luckily,” he says, “I don’t need your agreement. You don’t have to find her.” Unexpectedly, he lunges at Hop. Defiant as he might be, Hop is weak and still suffering the effects of the last injection. It takes approximately seven seconds for Brenner to manage to administer a second dose. As Hop crumples to

the floor, losing radio contact with his own limbs, Brenner looks down at him. “*She’ll find you.*”

* * *
— —

It’s a strange sensation.

Floating. Free of a body.

He is a mind. Maybe not even Jim Hopper’s mind, but a generic human brain, just floating around in the darkness, taking things in.

Jesus, he thinks, monitoring his own thoughts from somewhere far away. *I’m high as fuck.*

He’s aware, distantly, of the whirl of machines. Slowly, a different sort of awareness seeps into his consciousness. He’s aware of a presence. It’s the strangest thing. He can’t see it or hear it, but he knows it’s there.

No. Not *it*. *She*.

“El?” He tries to shout. Raises his voice and tries a second time, “El?” But he doesn’t hear anything and he doesn’t feel the vibrations of speech in his throat. He’s lost somewhere between worlds, he thinks, and only his mind is talking.

The presence grows stronger. Now senses are coming online. He feels cold. He must still have a body somewhere if it's able to register cold. He's not able to hear, exactly, but he starts to realize there's a sound. A distant voice that gets closer and grows stronger the longer he waits.

El?

"El!" He hollers like he's calling her for dinner, but nothing in his environment changes. He's still float-walking around some creepy mechanical abyss, unaware of what's happening to the body he's left behind. No voice vibrates in his throat.

"El? Kid, are you here?"

With each attempt to reach her, he hears the machines buzz and whir and crackle. He wonders what will happen to him if the machines keeping his mind separate from his body break down, or explode, or catch fire.

She's a wisp of sense in an otherwise empty void. He can't see her, can't hear her, but he knows the moment she realizes he's here. The very air – is there air here? What would it be besides air? But he doesn't feel himself breathing – is charged with energy.

Contact.

His kid is here. Is right where he is. He can't see her or hear her, but

he discovers, reaching out through the nothing with every bit of parental determination he possesses, that he can feel her.

For a split second, he doesn't know what to do, and then he does. He can't speak to her, but if he can feel her presence, he can communicate. His hand – would you look at that? He still has a hand – begins to tap in a rhythm. Dots and dashes they have long since abandoned in favor of “I'm running late” phone calls like a normal family. He hopes she remembers.

Channeling every bit of Dad-worry coursing through him, he focuses on the message.

Dot dash dot. Dot dot dash.

Please understand, his mind begs as his fingers continue to tap the rhythm.

Dot dash dot dot. Dot. Dot dot dot.

Please, please understand.

16. Code

Summary for the Chapter:

Listen. I'm sorry for the longer-than-usual delay. School starts Monday and it's a whole new ballgame. Psheeeew.

There are letter magnets on the fridge, the bright plastic kind every kid seems to have at some point. Joyce isn't sure how the magnets survived the years, and particularly the move, but when Jonathan found them in a box, he made a show of putting them on the fridge to tease Will.

"If you don't start growing soon, they're not going to let you go to high school anyway!" he'd joked, ruffling Will's hair as his brother tried to duck him. Jonathan never once looked in El's direction while he put the magnets on the fridge, which is how Joyce knew it was El he meant them for. Kind Jonathan. He hadn't even *blinked* before offering El his room the night Joyce brought her home from Starcourt, and he hasn't missed a beat as the caring big brother ever since.

Joyce is out of hiding and halfway to the kitchen when El turns to her, eyes alight with fevered hope.

"It's code. It's code! It's *him!*"

Her Joyce heart wants to believe wholeheartedly, to jump headfirst into the hope that wells within her. But her Mom heart cautions her to wait. If she's wrong – Hop isn't the only one who knows Morse code, of course – if El thinks it's him and then it isn't –

Shit, if I think it's him and then it isn't –

El's fingers are scrambling on the fridge, pulling letters down with one hand while the index finger of her free hand taps her thigh, counting the blinks of the light overhead. To Joyce, it just looks like random flashing, but El waits intently, then pulls down another letter. R ... U ... L ...

“What in God's name is going on here?”

Fuck. Mrs. Bennett. Joyce forgot all about her for a blissful moment. She turns to face the social worker with no idea what she's going to tell her, but El waves a hand fiercely behind her and Mike, shoulder to shoulder with El in the kitchen, puts a finger to his lips, looking angry.

“Please, just let her finish and she'll explain,” Joyce bids for time.

“Is this some kind of OCD thing?”

“No, I don't know, it's –“ Joyce catches her breath midsentence, watching El pull down another letter. *E. Rule? The lights are still flashing. S.*

El turns to face them as the light stops blinking and burns steadily like nothing ever happened.

“Rules,” she says.

“Rules?” Max repeats from the corner of the kitchen, and Mrs. Bennett wheels, startled, to face her, clutching a hand to her chest in alarm. Joyce wonders how Mrs. Bennett’s heart health is and what Child Welfare will do to the Byers family if they accidentally kill the social worker.

“Dear Lord, how many of you are there?” Mrs. Bennett mutters to the sky.

“Ironically enough, eleven,” Erica offers, cheerfully inserting herself into the conversation. She bounces into the kitchen and hands Joyce a box of lightbulbs. Then she brushes past El and opens the fridge door with just enough exuberant force to rattle the letters. El gives her a pinched look and suddenly the door slams closed again. Joyce isn’t sure whether it was Erica or El who closed the door, but before she can figure out how to ask without actually asking, the lights start flashing again.

Mike puts his hands on Erica’s shoulders and, somewhat politely but with no room for questions, moves her away from the fridge. Erica puts her hands up in mock surrender and rolls her eyes. El begins pulling letters down again. *D ... B ...* There’s only one of each letter, so she re-uses the S from Rules. The blinking stops.

“D, B, S?” Mike asks.

Joyce has no idea what it means, but El sure seems to. Her eyes go wide to make room for the tears that fill them.

“What is it, honey?” Joyce asks, making her own shushing motion at Mrs. Bennett, who has just opened her mouth to speak. When Joyce shushes her, the social worker begins writing in her notebook instead.

“Don’t be stupid,” El whispers.

For a second, Joyce thinks El is being rude about the message, but then El touches each letter as she says the corresponding word. “Don’t be stupid. That was our rule.” Her hand lightly brushes the word “rule” above the other letters.

“Whose rule?”

“Hop and me. At the cabin. We had the Don’t Be Stupid rules.”

Joyce’s heart swells with hope anew. “Well, what were they?” she presses.

El swallows, hard. Where Joyce is feeling encouraged by this confirmation that the message came from Hop, El’s demeanor has changed to one of fear.

“Keep the curtains closed,” El recites, voice barely above a whisper. “Don’t open the door unless you hear my secret knock. Don’t go outside alone, especially in the daylight.”

And Joyce realizes what she means by “at the cabin.” She isn’t talking about the kind of rules Hop made about leaving the door

open three inches or eating at least one vegetable for every Eggo. She's talking about before. Before any of them, except Hop, of course, knew El had survived the Demogorgon.

Joyce has long wanted to be angry with Hop for hiding the child and not even telling *her*, but the fact is, she might have fallen a little bit in love with James Hopper the night he pulled an angry, edgily-clad teenager into a one-armed hug while chiding her about her absence. The feelings that overtook Joyce when she realized Hop had been hiding the missing girl – and not just hiding her, but *raising* her – well, they weren't feelings she ever got watching Lonnie's piss-poor attempt at parenting, that was for sure.

Erica shakes Joyce from her blush-worthy thoughts by reading over Mrs. Bennett's shoulder. "What's *phys-iatric distress*?" Mrs. Bennett snaps her notebook closed, looking positively livid.

"Physiatric – do you mean psychiatric? Could there have been a *ch* in there?" This is Jonathan, emerging from the hallway, much to the chagrin of Mrs. Bennett, who seems to think there are children hiding in the walls.

Erica shrugs. "I don't know. Maybe. For a professional, this lady sure doesn't have the best handwriting."

"Now, hang on," Mrs. Bennett protests.

"No, you hang on. Psychiatric distress?" Joyce echoes in disbelief, anger bubbling over. "Listen, lady, you don't even *know* El. Where do you get off judging her *psychiatric distress* in relation to things you

can't begin to understand? If you only knew how strong this kid is, how much she's been through –"

"Joyce." El's voice is whisper-quiet, but it slices through Joyce's anger, refocusing her on the child standing by the fridge, still touching the rainbow letters as if she's holding her father's hand.

Joyce swallows hard, actively refocusing herself on her child instead of the insufferable woman judging them all. "What is it, El?"

"It's code," El says again.

"Wh – uh, code for what?"

"He's telling me there's danger."

"Who," Mrs. Bennett says with abject bewilderment in her voice, "is El?"

"That's El," Erica says, pointing at El. "And that, apparently, is Chief Hopper." She points at the ceiling. "Any questions?"

"Yes. Yes, I have questions."

"Well, save 'em. We've got bigger problems. What do we do, Chief?"

Erica looks up at the light expectantly.

Mike shoves her lightly. "It's not an intercom."

"Yeah? Well, who has a better idea? Anybody? That's right. I didn't think so." Erica puts a hand on her hip and looks smugly at Mike.

A second later, she flies sideways across the kitchen –

-- a mere instant before the light fixture , which has detached from the ceiling, smashes to the floor right where she had just been standing.

The crash is so loud and unexpected that for a beat, nobody moves. Then Max, seeing nobody else taking action, cross the kitchen to help Erica to her feet.

"Are you okay?" Joyce asks.

"What ... what just happened?" Mrs. Bennett demands in a high, shaking voice.

"I'm fine, no thanks to the Chief," Erica says with a dark glance at the ceiling. "Thanks for the save, Superhero," she adds to Eleven, who nods as she wipes away a trickle of a nosebleed.

Joyce quickly takes stocks of everybody's angles and points of view, and arrives at *Oh, crap!* There's no way Mrs. Bennett didn't see Erica fly clean off her feet without being touched.

"Well, see, the thing is ..." Mike begins.

"Something about the electrical charge when the light fixture broke –" Max attempts to sound scientific.

"Erica does gymnastics, don't you, Erica?" Joyce invents.

But Mrs. Bennett's notebook tugging free of her hand and shooting across the kitchen to El shocks everyone into silence.

At the fridge, El calmly opens the notebook, scanning the last written-on page.

"Yes," she finally says. "There's a *ch*." And she closes the notebook and walks out of the kitchen to start drawing the curtains in the living room.

17. Stupid

Summary for the Chapter:

In which El is pissed and Mrs. Bennett is in denial

By the time Max catches up, El's made it halfway around the living room, closing curtains with a haphazard combination of sharp tugs by hand and supernatural swings of her arm. Mike's on her heels, fixing bent curtain rods.

"Whoa," Max says. "Hey, don't get me wrong, because I love that you feel empowered, but what's got you so pissed? I thought you'd be happy."

"Happy," El repeats, like she doesn't know what the word means. Sometimes it's tough to tell, but Max is pretty sure El knows what happy means. She presses forward.

"Yeah. I mean, Hopper's alive. That's good news, El." Max doesn't stop to examine the shred of bitterness she feels at the revelation. Hop and Billy both died at Starcourt, and now Hopper is alive, full stop. But there'll be time to sort through her weird, inappropriate jealousy later. Right now her friend needs her.

"Not here," El says, checking door and window locks. If the locks withstand the force of El's anger, they should hold against evil scientists, so that's a plus.

"What?"

“Hop’s not *here*,” El repeats. “And he doesn’t want me to look for him. He wants me to stay ... cooped up. Like a *pet*.” Mike winces on the word *pet*.

“And you’re just going to do it?” Max asks. She doesn’t *exactly* mean to imply that El should disobey Hopper’s not-quite-from-beyond-the-grave directive. She’s more just surprised to find that El is complying. But Mike gives her a dark look.

“Of course she’s going to do it,” he says. “Hopper says she’s in danger.”

El rattles the front door so hard, the knob comes off in her hand. Max knows from experience that it’s not as impressive as it looks. It actually doesn’t take that much to shake a doorknob loose from a cheaply-made door in a crappily-built house. El looks at her hand, and back at the neat hole it’s left in the door, and back at her hand again. Max hears the other half of the doorknob clatter to the sidewalk out front and the house seems suddenly much less secure.

“Always in danger,” El says, glaring daggers at the doorknob in her hand.

“That’s not true,” Mike says, because boyfriends lie.

El’s head snaps up and she stares him down. “The stupid ... don’t be stupid rules are never *gone*. Everything normal is *stupid*. I’m never ...” She searches for the word, frustration making her eyes shine

with tears.

“Safe?” Max supplies.

El turns to face her, a single, angry tear shaking loose to roll down her cheek. “Free,” she corrects.

Oh.

Max takes a slow, deep breath in, and then nods. “Yeah, that sucks,” she agrees. “I’d be pissed, too. But right now we need to check the window locks in the bedrooms. And somebody needs to fix that doorknob. Should probably barricade the door, too, if it’s that easy to break.” Sometimes when everything sucks, it helps to be practical. Max knows because things suck a lot, and she’s the most practical person she knows. She can spackle a fist-shaped hole in a wall, realign a sliding closet door with its tracks, and tighten a screw to make a cabinet door latch properly.

She can also read social workers. They’re even easier to read than the cheesy pamphlets they leave for her mom to throw away before Neil gets home. Mrs. Bennett, who was taking deep breaths and stuttering nonsensical syllables in the kitchen with Joyce when Max left them, has recovered, and when she enters the room, Max reads *denial* like it’s stamped on her forehead.

Joyce is tumbling along at the social worker’s heels, supplying reasons why El is safest with the Byers. “You don’t know these people who are after her, Mrs. Bennett. We do! *I* do! Another foster home isn’t going to know how to protect her. This isn’t like an angry birth

mom showing up to cause trouble. These people want to kidnap her and turn her into a weapon!”

Mrs. Bennett looks like she’s holding it pretty well together until her socked foot squishes into patch of carpet that’s darker than the rest, and her eyes close briefly and she blows out a long, slow breath between her lips. In a somewhat undignified fashion, she begins to wiggle her feet into her shoes. “Mrs. Byers, I can tell from your comments that you’ve never dealt with an angry birth mom showing up to cause trouble, but I assure you, the agency is skilled at keeping our children safe. It’s what we do.”

“No. No,” Joyce says, holding up a finger like Mrs. Bennett is one of her sons. “Because the angry birth mom is there because she loves her kid, okay? However misguided, whatever choices she’s made, if she’s there, it’s out of love. She’s- it’s- I –” Joyce squeezes at the air with two frustrated hands as though she can form the words physically out of nothing. “These, these people don’t *love* El. They don’t even treat her like a human. And they’re dangerous, Lisa. They will *kill* your foster family. They will kill *you* to get to El. And Hop says they’re coming.”

Mrs. Bennett, now in her shoes, whirls to face Joyce. “Who,” she demands, “is this Hop? And when did he say anything? You mean when the lights blinked? Because the wiring in your house is out of code?”

“Oh, and I suppose your notebook flew across the room to El because our gravity is out of code?” Joyce nods angrily, her face the picture of disgust. “You go ahead, you bask in that denial like nothing out of the ordinary happened. But you leave *my daughter* out of it!”

There's a brief silence. Even El has stopped her angry circuit of the room, and Max hears her friend's small, sharp intake of breath on the word *daughter*. Mrs. Bennett tightens her lips for a moment and then shakes her head once as if to clear it. "I'll be in touch," she says like a threat, and reaches for the door.

Her hand passes through empty air. Slowly, El holds up the broken doorknob.

Before anyone can speak, there is a massive *BANG* at the front door. Max jumps a mile as she whirls to face the danger. The door swings inward, directly into poor Mrs. Bennett, who is still trying to figure out how on earth to escape from the house without a doorknob. (You stick your finger in the space where the doorknob should be and you press the little thingy to the side yourself until it unlatches, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure it out, but now isn't the time and Max really ought to focus.) The door has hit Mrs. Bennett with such force that she nearly goes down. Immediately, Joyce and Jonathan flank her, shoulders to the door to hold it closed. Another great *WHAM!* signals Max that, sure enough, someone is trying to bust the door down.

Max and Mike propel El towards the hallway just as the rest of the Party appears there, various strains of *what the hell's going on* getting lost to the ruckus at the door. El twists loose, freeing her hands to hold them up toward the threatening sounds. They tremble slightly, and the subsequent nosebleed is much heavier than it ought to be just for holding closed a door. Max wonders how out of practice El is now that her powers have been gone a while, and what additional effects their use might have on El. She moved a notebook and now she's holding a door closed, but she looks as though she's battled an otherworldly monster for an hour or two. *Because we totally know what that looks like*, Max's mind supplies grimly.

“El, stop,” Max says. “They have it. They have the door. Save your powers for something we can’t do by hand.”

El’s gaze flickers from the door to Max and back again. She looks anguished – disappointed in herself – but she nods and lowers her hands. The door resumes its rattle with every impact from outside, but Joyce, Jonathan, and Mrs. Bennett have it. Mrs. Bennett, to her credit, has braced herself and put her shoulder into the door. Max mentally reevaluates the social worker and gives her a shred of grudging credit for her dedication to El’s safety, clueless though she may be.

“Kids, get in the back,” Joyce says. “Hide. All of you, hide. I don’t know how many of them there –”

“Two,” says a voice from the kitchen doorway. It’s an unfamiliar voice and Max spins to find a strange man standing in the threshold between kitchen and living room. He’s wearing a suit and acting casual despite the large gun he has in one hand. Under his other arm, hand over her mouth, he’s got a pissed-off Erica Sinclair. “One to distract. And the other to walk right in the back door. Who keeps the key under the mat these days? You ought to know better, Mrs. Byers.”

18. Angry

El once moved a train car with the power of her anger. El is angry. El is angrier than she can remember ever being, because anger is – is – she can't think of the word. Anger is that thing the points did on that game show that time, and Hop explained the concept so she could understand why her favorite player lost. The thing where something adds and adds and adds, so even if you did great at the end of the game, you could already be so far behind that you'd never catch up.

Cumulative.

Anger is *cumulative*.

Her anger is so cumulative that when the stranger appears in the kitchen doorway, threatening Erica Sinclair, who is eleven years old, with a gun, El doesn't even know what's happening and then there's a stranger-shaped hole in the kitchen wall and El is half-conscious in Mike's arms.

Distantly, she can hear her friends shouting, "Whoa!" and "Hey, what's wrong?" But she doesn't even care that she can't use her limbs and her head is swimming and her nose is bleeding because she's *angry angry angry so angry*.

Then Joyce's face swims into view, all Mom-like, hand smoothing El's hair out of her eyes. "Stop," she's saying. "Honey, stop."

El takes sluggish stock of the situation, because she isn't sure what

she's supposed to stop. She's on the living room floor, she's in Mike's arms, she's reaching toward the kitchen with both angry hands –

Oh –

El drops her hands like they've been burned, and the screaming on the other side of the kitchen wall stops, which is when El realizes there had been screaming on the other side of the kitchen wall. Horror and exhaustion and nausea and *anger* swim up from her stomach into her throat and then into her mouth and then she's sick all over the carpet and Joyce is petting her like a stray cat. "Okay, honey. You're okay."

"Did I ..." El has to stop in the middle of her sentence to catch her breath. "... kill him?"

There's a pause while Joyce makes eye contact with Steve in the kitchen doorway, and he shakes his head and gives her a grim thumbs-up. Then, "No, baby. You didn't kill him, you just kind of ..."

"Windmilled him through the wall and used him to knock out his accomplice," Max supplies in obvious admiration. She and the rest of the Party have crowded into the doorway to the kitchen, where Steve makes himself a wall, keeping them corralled in the living room.

"Erica's okay?"

"Oh, I'm better than okay!" Erica's smug grin looms in and out of

focus. “You threw that shithead like a Frisbee. That’ll teach him to pull guns on little girls!”

“Erica, language,” Joyce says, because she’s the mom on duty.

“I didn’t ... kill him?” El repeats. She’s stuck on the idea that maybe she killed him. Her mouth tastes funny, like metal. All of a sudden, she doesn’t feel angry anymore, and all the places in her that were hot with anger go cold like ice. *That’ll teach him to pull guns on little girls.* There were guns before, in the middle school. Before that, even. Back in her first life. There were guns and there were worse things than guns and she was a little girl then and she killed people.

She can’t hear her friends anymore, can only hear the snapping of necks, the thud of bodies hitting the floor. And Papa’s shoes on tile, unhurried. *Remarkable.* As though she’s done a complicated math problem. Back then she didn’t know. She didn’t know that people had families. She only knew about Papa. She only knew there was a closing door and she possessed a way to stop it. Now she’s a real girl and those were real men and they had people waiting at home that they never came home to and that was *her*, she did that – *I did that, I killed them, the man in the kitchen, did I kill the man in the kitchen?*

She must have asked it out loud again, because Joyce is reassuring her. “He’s alive. Come and see. He’s alive, he’s just in the process of getting duct taped to a chair. He and his buddy both.”

El breathes in and out four or five times like she’s been running. Tears slip out of the corners of her eyes and she tries to remember when she stopped standing up, because she hates when tears run into her ears like they’re doing. “Duck taped?”

“So he can’t pull any more guns,” Erica supplies. She’s tugging El’s hands and Joyce is propping her up by the shoulders and Mike looms into her woozy field of vision.

“Hey,” he says. “El. Are you okay?” He is focused only on her, and she is suddenly afraid he can see all the men she’s killed. Her breathing speeds up. She needs to hide from him. Her limbs are too heavy for the work of standing. She oozes back to the floor. “Give her a minute,” Mike demands. He stays close, too close and too focused and she can’t – she can’t – he’ll see – *Oh god oh god oh god oh god --*

“Listen to my voice.”

El doesn’t know who’s speaking, and somehow that makes it easier for her to do as she’s been told. She focuses on the smooth, calm voice as it continues, “Let’s count up to five. One ... “

The pause seems expectant, so El pushes the number one past her lips.

“Two ...”

“T – two ...”

“Three ...”

With each number, El recaptures a little more of her breath. They get to five, turn around and start back down the mountain. Five ... four ... three ... by two, El believes she didn't kill the man in the kitchen. By one, she understands it's Mrs. Bennett who's counting her down.

"There we go," Mrs. Bennett's voice is gentle, so gentle for someone who recently stood angrily in wet socks, trying to grasp a broken doorknob. "You're all right now, Jane."

"El."

"El, then. You're okay."

El lets her mind swim up from the depths of panic, breaking the surface to find that she's lying on her side on Joyce's olive green carpet, face to face with Mrs. Bennett, who is also lying on the floor, face to face with her. "You were having a panic attack," Mrs. Bennett says. "You're okay now. You might feel tired. But you're safe now, Jane."

"El," she corrects again.

"My apologies." Mrs. Bennett looks so different when she's tipped sideways onto the carpet. So much less scary.

El continues to lay on the floor, blinking blearily at Mrs. Bennett. Mrs. Bennett looks steadily back. She looks like it is the most normal thing in the world to lay on the floor of a stranger's home after

arriving to take their child away, only to find that the child in question has the power to –

El's breath quickens again and her mind ping pongs away from the word *kill*.

“One ...” Mrs. Bennett says, noticing El's increased distress.

They count up the ladder again, and back down, and all the while, Joyce is stroking El's hair and Mike has her feet and is rubbing her leg and Steve has finally relented and allowed everyone else to go into the kitchen to deal with –

When her mind starts to examine anything to do with the kitchen, her panic skyrockets and Mrs. Bennett makes them count again. With every trip up and down the ladder, El finds herself more exhausted than before.

“You can sleep,” Joyce says finally, somewhere near her ear. “We have this, El. We won't let anyone get hurt. You go to sleep.”

Joyce's permission is all it takes, and consciousness falls away.

Without trying, like it is the easiest thing in the world, she steps into the void.

At first, it's only blackness, and ripples spreading out from her steps. She's still in her sock feet and yesterday's clothes. She becomes aware of how badly she wants to wash her face and brush her teeth. Instead, she turns in a full circle, looking for a sign of which way she ought to go.

Far, far away, on what would be the horizons if this place had horizons, there is a light. She thinks at first that it's the sun. But as she walks toward it, it gathers shape and sound, and she recognizes a train. As soon as she recognizes it, she realizes it's heading straight toward her. It's still a great distance away, but it's moving fast and she can hardly move at all. Her sluggish feet kick through invisible water. She tries to escape to either side, out of the way, but no matter which way she goes, the tracks she can't see seem to curve in her direction.

The light grows larger, the whistle louder. El turns and begins to run. She's barely making any progress and she can hear the train almost upon her, the scream of metal wheels on invisible track, the rattle of the connections between the cars. When she smells coal and fire and imminent danger, El drops to a crouch, arms shielding her head, face pressed against her knees, terrified. She waits for impact.

It takes long, shaky seconds to realize that nothing's happened. She's not flattened and dead. She can still hear the train sounds, the rattle and the whistle, but they're muted, and she can hear other sounds. The rustle of paper and the murmur of voices.

She looks up to find she's sitting on a bench seat in a train car, opposite Hop, which doesn't make sense, because she only left him an hour ago and he was still drugged and lost in some lab. But here

he is on the train. He's shaved since she saw him, but he's still the wrong shape, sunken in where he used to puff out, and his eyes are tired and angry. Her heart squeezes with affection. Sometimes she thinks she and Hop understand each other so well because they both know the same kind of anger. Of course it makes for some interesting blow-ups at home when they both get angry at each other. But it also means when she wakes up seething from nightmare, poisoned by ugly, angry thoughts, he knows to work the pillow between her fingers so she can twist it, knows to take her out to chop wood, knows to keep her hands busy so she won't bite at them to hold the ugliness inside.

She's in the void. She's not really here. And there isn't a pillow, or any wood to chop, and he isn't biting at his hands. He's only staring straight ahead, body perfectly still, eyes anything but. So El does the only thing she knows to do. She eases herself across the gap so that she's sitting on the same seat, next to Hop. He might not know it, but she takes his hand. They sit and be angry together, father and daughter on a journey through the darkness.

19. Questions

Summary for the Chapter:

Steve and Robin are an interrogation super-duo. Ish.

Notes for the Chapter:

There's nothing I can say except that I am SO sorry!! I've had now four foster placements (not at the same time!) (Well, two at the same time, and they were 12 and 13 years old, so that was a thing.) (But currently I just have one 9-year-old boy, so I'm getting shot in the butt with Nerf bullets on the regular.) And also, I'm a teacher during COVID, so shit got real for a while there. I always meant to come back and here I am, but I'm also not 100% sure I remember all the threads of this plot and where I was going with it, so, like, we'll discover it together, yeah? Onward.

“My, my,” Steve says, leaning casually against the back of a kitchen chair, then catching himself when it starts to scoot out from under him. “How the tables have turned.”

Robin, who has one leg braced against the overturned kitchen table while she pulls the vacuum cleaner cord tighter around the semi-conscious evil government scientist with both hands, takes the time to stare at him in silent judgment before saying, “Did you *really* just make a dad joke?”

Steve, who *could* be helping with the tying-up, but *isn't*, looks insulted. “What are you talking about? I just meant that the two of us interrogating an evil Russian scientist dude instead of the other way around? The tables have turned. Why? What'd you think I meant?”

Robin looks from him to the overturned table and back to him. At the last second, the edge of his mouth quirks up and gives him away. Robin rolls her eyes and tries not to crack a smile.

She never meant to be friends with Steve Harrington, but that's what working crappy minimum wage jobs does to a person. Sure, they'd really bonded in the spy-infested bowels of Starcourt, and she came out to him in a bathroom stall while under the influence of a mind-altering substance, but even before that, they'd forged a lopsided friendship. Steve is the only person who understands what a pain in the butt the faulty door latch is (well, was) on the walk-in freezer at Scoops, or how much she used to hate the "regulars" who expected her to remember their insanely complicated sundae recipes in the middle of a busy Friday, or the fact that the manager, Mr. Fletcher, actually *counted the sample spoons* so that she and Steve couldn't sneak too many tastes of the only good part about their job. (Besides the money. The money was a good part of their job. But even that was scant and barely enough reason to keep putting on the silly hat. At least at the video store, the uniform isn't in any way related to sailing.)

She finishes off the best knot she can manage in a vacuum cord, not really even thinking about the fact that she's tying up a whole entire person. Truth be told, Robin is struggling to find the horror or dread or at least reluctance she should feel to be in charge of interrogating semiconscious Russians in Jonathan Byers' kitchen. Steve has a point; turnabout's fair play, and all that. If she and Steve had to endure interrogation in the dark underbelly of Starcourt, tied to chairs and high on mystery substances, then surely she, sober and sleep-deprived, couldn't be expected to drum up sympathy for these two bozos.

Of course, she doesn't really know *how* to run an interrogation, but

she figures that's Steve's area. He has more experience with interrogations. He's just usually on the other side of them. It must be refreshing to be almost a whole day into A Situation and to not have a black eye yet. Currently, he's standing squarely facing the more conscious of the two intruders, arms crossed over his chest and a look of detached interest and slight superiority on his features. Honestly, if he gave her that look, she'd probably punch him, too.

"So," Steve says. "Why don't you tell us everything?"

Robin rolls her eyes. She's pretty sure the man in the chair, whose eyes keep rolling back in his head before he jerks himself awake, isn't going to tell them everything. El has done a real number on him, and he's fighting to stay conscious, but when he does manage to wake himself up, he looks furious.

Steve cuts a nervous glance to Robin while still trying to look smug when addressing their hostage. "What do we do now?" he asks out of the corner of his mouth. "Like, torture him?"

Robin rolls her eyes. So much for Steve being the go-to interrogator. She decides she'll have to step up. She tries to channel community theater from ten million years ago when she was in high school, putting on what she hopes is an unreadable expression. Slowly, she walks back and forth between the two men, although the second of the two is still unconscious and dripping blood slowly from his bowed head. Robin turns to face the conscious one and continues her pacing, trying to look the part of seasoned detective.

"That's it," Steve says. "Use your wiles."

Robin drops her acting stance to stare in irritation at Steve, but he's stepped up for another go at the hostage. "Why don't you tell us your name, and we won't get Eleven back in here?"

The hostage sits up straighter, eyes going slightly wide before he schools his features into stern noncompliance. *Bingo*, Robin thinks, making eye contact with Steve. He nods slightly. They don't need to use torture. Fear of the psychic teenager is as potent as any weapon.

"I don't know, Robin," Steve says. He obviously did not do community theater and he lacks her skill at disguising his emotions, but he manages to pull off "good cop" pretty well since he's such an obnoxiously good guy anyway. "That's kind of cruel, even for what these guys deserve. Eleven's on the rampage. What if she ... you know, finishes them?"

Eleven is in no way on the rampage -- last time Robin checked the living room, the younger girl was asleep on the carpet with a social worker on the floor facing her and Joyce Byers laying behind her, wrapping her in a hug. The girl didn't seem to have any juice left, or any desire to face more enemies, but their kitchen captives didn't need to know that.

"Let her finish them," Robin says, beginning to enjoy her role as bad cop. She always liked playing the villain back in theater. Villain always had better lines than hero. She catches herself just this side of putting on a fake Russian accent and adds, "They tried to finish her. It's only fair."

"Nyet," the man in the chair protested. "No. No! We did not try to finish her. Instructions are very clear: she must be captured alive."

The term “captured” sinks a slight weight into the fun of performing, and Robin realizes anew that there’s a lot more at stake here than just a standing ovation and a bouquet of flowers. (She never got the bouquet anyway, that was always for the hero, not the villain.) (But she should probably focus now.) This man didn’t come here to be tied to a chair and interrogated. He came here to kidnap an exhausted, traumatized teenager. Robin doesn’t know El very well, but she feels some weird protective instinct flare up in her. This must be what Steve feels like all the time, she thinks, and it gives her some insight into the jackass who’s become her best friend.

“Captured why?” Steve asks. “And for who?”

“Whom,” Robin corrects, and Steve swivels his head around to stare at her. “Now?” he asks.

“Sorry.”

Their captive is shaking his head. He lets loose a string of Russian from which Robin picks up nothing more substantial than a headache, even though she and Steve have been playing at learning Russian ever since Starcourt, just in case. But from his tone, she can guess what he’s saying, and it’s confirmed when he switches to English: “I tell you nothing.”

“Hmm.” Robin strolls toward the door to the living room. “I guess I should ask Eleven to come in here. See if she can help loosen your lips.”

Again, fear flares in the captive when he hears the name “Eleven.” Robin wonders if it was wise to send such a scaredy-cat here to capture a mark he’s so obviously afraid of, and she also wonders what all these men have been told about Eleven, who strikes Robin as many things, but none of them scary.

“Or you can reconsider,” Steve offers. “Tell us what you know so we can let you go before ...” he glances toward the living room and lowers his voice. “... *she* comes in here.”

“I know only we capture her,” the man insists. “Alive. We treat her like tiger.”

“Like what now?” Steve deadpans.

“Like tiger, like tiger,” the man repeats, as though Steve is very stupid. “We capture. We stay clear of jaws and claws or we be killed.”

“I don’t think she actually *bites* people,” Steve says, bewildered, but Robin gets it. These men have been schooled in how dangerous their job is. They’ve been told to capture Eleven as if she were a wild animal that might attack. The fear, she realizes, isn’t a detriment. It’s an asset. If Brenner sent people in here expecting to capture a little girl, they’d be dead in five seconds. These men are expecting a tiger.

“Let’s cut to the chase,” Robin says with impatience. “Who sent you here to capture this *tiger*? ”

The man hesitates, and it becomes clear there is one thing he fears more than the tiger in the next room.

“It was Brenner, wasn’t it?” Robin presses. The man tightens his jaw and refuses to speak, but the fear that flares in his eyes tells her what she needs to know. She makes meaningful eye contact with Steve.

In the split second between meeting his gaze and realizing he has no idea what she’s trying to convey, the second man, who has appeared unconscious this whole time, suddenly snakes a foot out and sweeps Steve’s ankles out from under him. Steve goes down face-first on top of the first man, knocking both of them over in a cacophony of splintering chair legs and profanity in two languages. Robin launches herself toward the second man, who has clearly been awake this whole time. *Stupid*, she berates herself for not checking. *Stupid, stupid*.

She barely has time to think the third “stupid” before the man is on her. He must have been spending the entire interrogation working on loosening his bonds, which, to be honest, weren’t that tight to begin with, since it’s tough to tie a lamp cord when the lamp is still attached. Robin feels the man collide with her full force and she flies backward, landing on something soft that “oofs” in a familiar voice. Kicking upward, she feels her foot connect with something, but then a hand grips her ankle and Robin goes wild. To hell with Eleven being the tiger. Robin is sick of being held captive and manhandled when all she was ever trying to do was sling some damn ice cream for the summer.

The ruckus in the kitchen must have alerted the others that there was a problem, because suddenly, of all people, Dustin and Erica arrive, fists swinging. A second later, Jonathan drags them back and takes their place, helping Robin secure the “unconscious” man while Steve continues to fight the other.

The first gunshot splinters the door frame not an inch from Robin's head, and the second isn't far behind. Someone in the next room screams. Before the intruder can fire again, the gun is ripped from his hand by an invisible force and thrown out the broken window. A second later, the man follows it, punctuated by Eleven's scream of effort from the doorway. Steve lets his own hostage go when it becomes clear his only desire is to follow the first man out of the house, though he uses the door, not the window. The kitchen is dead quiet for a moment, until Joyce Byers barges in. "Did someone get shot?"

Robin starts shaking her head and finds it difficult to stop. "No," she says. "No. Everyone's okay. Right?" she looks around. "Everyone's okay?"

Steve's got a busted lip and the start of a black eye. Jonathan looks unscathed, but horrified, staring at Robin as if she's grown an extra head.

Joyce looks where Jonathan's looking and her own eyes go wide. "Shit," she hisses. "Shit. Robin, honey, it's okay. Everything's going to be fine."

Robin frowns. Does she not look like she thinks everything's going to be fine? She thinks she's actually doing a pretty good job of it, considering she just did *more* battle with evil Russians and even pulled off "bad cop."

But now Steve is looking, too, and El, and all four pairs of eyes on her look horrified. Robin lets her gaze follow theirs, where it finds her

shoulder to be entirely the wrong color.

“Shit,” she says.

Steve is suddenly several paces closer and has a hand out like he’s going to catch her if she falls. Which ...

“Whoa,” Steve says. “Okay.” He catches her and eases her to sitting as the pain of the gunshot wound in her shoulder finally registers.

“Shit,” she says again. “Shit.”

“Yeah,” Steve wholeheartedly agrees.

20. Off

Summary for the Chapter:

Eleven is back.

Notes for the Chapter:

I don't know about this chapter, y'all, but it's something.

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The chaos in the kitchen is oddly synchronized. Everyone has a role to assume. Joyce is Super Mom, or maybe Nurse Mom. She's halfway across the kitchen with a dish towel in her hand, the *brrrrring* sound of its quick removal from the door handle of the oven still sounding in everyone's ears, before anyone else can even move. She descends on Robin, who is seated now with Steve as a backrest, and makes eye contact with the girl, wincing in sympathy, before pressing the dish towel against the wound. Robin hisses at the contact and Steve tightens his hold on her arm.

Steve, of course, has stepped into the role of Mother Hen. He keeps checking Robin's pulse in her neck and wrist until she swats him away.

"I'm clearly alive, Dingus," she says, but her voice is a shadow of itself.

Mrs. Bennett moves for the telephone to call for help, and Jonathan steps toward her, looking agonized. Yes, Robin needs medical attention. No, they can't have emergency types swarming this place with the hole in the kitchen wall and the shooters on the other side of it, possibly dead. Jonathan's indecision prompts Erica to leap forward, yanking the phone cord out of the wall. Decision made, problem solved.

Dustin, Lucas, and Max crowd around Robin in fascinated horror. Mrs. Bennett, thwarted from her telephone mission and rattling off a string of admonitions in Erica's direction, nonetheless takes over the role of shepherding the children away from the "traumatic scene."

"If only she knew," Erica said to the group with a meaningful look, as if Mrs. Bennett isn't standing right there.

Relegated to the living room, everyone begins talking at once. Slightly apart from the group is Mike, whose gaze always looks for El first. Anyone watching would probably notice that his gaze at this moment refuses to settle, flicking from one face to the next, his expression becoming more agitated.

"Where's El?" he asks. His voice breaks and he clears his throat. No one has heard him, so he asks again, louder. "Where's El?"

There is a split second of hesitation and then the kids surge in a disorganized wave back toward the kitchen. Mrs. Bennett tries uselessly to get ahead of them, whether to turn the tide or to look for El herself is unclear. It's no use. El isn't in the kitchen. The door remains firmly closed, but the hole in the wall, the hole she threw the intruders through, that hole gapes at them, plenty wide enough for El to have gone through. Horror floods the members of the Party as they rush for the door, pulling it open in a jumble of elbows and profanity. They spill out onto the lawn over the protests of the adults. The shooter is dead on the grass.

His accomplice, and Eleven, are nowhere to be seen.

\*\*\*\*

Through a crush of noise and chaos in her mind, she knows that she is Eleven, and she is the only one who can stop this.

There is no fear. There is no cold. There is no guilt for the dead man on the grass, nor the live man she holds at the end of two angry hands he knows can twist him dead if he so much as hesitates. She ought to be out of juice by now. The way her nose is gushing, she ought to be out of blood, too. She is neither. The exhaustion and fear of the last several hours are dead like the man on the grass.

There is one off switch for this mess and she is it.

She barely even knows Robin. It's not about Robin, even though Robin is pretty and nice and smiles at El. El is gone. Eleven is here. This is bigger than Robin. This is about a whole town, a whole world, and the *other* whole world underneath it. She won't let any more poison spill out of the Upside Down and onto the people who are nice to her.

*"Weapons aren't toys," Hop said, and then winced. He had this thing about toys. He thought she should play with some, even though she was kind of old for toys. He kept buying her toys he liked when he was a kid, or toys Sarah liked when she was ... before the black hole. El looked at the toys with confusion and delight. She rarely knew what to do with them, except the soft things. The soft things, she held.*

*"I just mean," Hop said, "I don't want you playing with this."*

*"Not playing," she protested, but she put the hunting rifle back on its hook. "Cleaning."*

*"Cleaning?"*

*"Spiders."*

*His eyes surveyed the gun, the hooks, the cobwebs behind it. The corner of his mouth twitched up. "Spiders," he repeated. He was constantly trying to get her to use more words, but sometimes he talked the way she talked, and it made her feel relieved, like she didn't have to work so hard.*

*"Spiders," she confirmed with half a smile like his.*

*"Okay," he said, ruffling her hair. "Well. I appreciate you cleaning. I know that's what I asked you to do when I left. Just ... be careful about guns, okay? You never know if the safety's on."*

*"Safety?"*

*He shows her the little button that turns the gun from safe into danger. "The safety," he says. "We keep the safety on. But sh - stuff happens, so I still don't want you to bother the guns."*



*She likes how he says “we.” It makes her feel home.*

Home is gone. That little girl who smiled at toys and hugged bears is gone. Her dad who repeated single words for her is gone. But Papa isn't yet.

No, not Papa. Brenner. Martin Brenner spent years turning her into a weapon. Now the safety is off.